

EXTRAORDINARY  
POPULAR  
*Delusions*  
*and the*  
MADNESS  
*of*  
*Snowflake*

David Ben

3035-12

...ssion for play is probably as old,  
...ring, as the race of man. Some of us  
...to risk a dollar, but the percentage of peo  
...everish nation who would not enjoy winning d  
...small. The passion culminates in the professi  
...ould rather play than eat. Winning is not his s  
...at. Some one has remarked that there is but o  
...are in life greater than winning, that is, in maki  
...hazard.

...be successful at play is as difficult as to succeed  
...ther pursuit. The laws of chance are as immutabl  
...laws of nature. Were all gamblers to depend o  
...they would break about even in the end. The pro  
...nal card player may enjoy the average luck, but  
...ult to find one who thinks he does, and it is inde  
...ful how mere chance will at times defeat  
...st combination of wit and skill. It is al  
...at a novice will win his first stake. A  
...of a "club-room," overhearing a  
...ning up two hands at poker, ventur  
...rpolation: "Don't trouble 'bout  
...o' own han'. De suckah, k  
...And many old play  
...r, the vagarie



someone dug up some records of  
 I've always held the belief that I may have met  
 Andrews (Erdnase) in the Public Library around  
 this time. Because one day when I was avidly  
 reading some hand-caps secrets in a periodical  
 a man approached me and said "I've been watching  
 you, you must be interested in magic"  
 He asked me to come into another room and showed  
 me some really beautiful sleights with cards.  
 years later I realized that several of these were  
 explained <sup>in this</sup> remarkable treatise "The Expert at  
 the Card Table"  
 Well Sid believe it or not Faucett would  
 point if he ever knew that I wrote a letter of  
 any kind. Hope you can decipher this scrawl.

Very Warmest Wishes  
 Dai

Excerpt of letter from Dai Vernon to Sid Lorriane, David Ben Collection

**I** CAN'T TELL YOU who he is, but I can tell you who he isn't," Dai Vernon reasoned. The subject was the identity of the author of *Artifice, Ruse and Subterfuge at the Card Table*, also known as *The Expert at the Card Table*, the most influential text on sleight-of-hand of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Published in Chicago in 1902 "by the author," it is generally accepted that "S. W. Erdnase," the stated author, was a pseudonym.<sup>2</sup> Over the decades, many well-known personalities in the magic community—John Sprong, Leo Rullman, Martin Gardner, Bill Woodfield, Jay Marshall, John Booth, Bart Whaley, Jeff Busby, Thomas Sawyer, Richard Hatch, David Alexander, and Todd Karr among them—have tried to unravel the author's secret identity.

For many years, the leading candidate was Milton Franklin Andrews, a murderous cardsharp. This Andrews was uncovered by a slew of sleuths, the leader of the charge being writer and math-

<sup>1</sup> Prior works of influence were Robert-Houdin's *Les Secrets de la Prestidigitation et de la Magie* (1868), Hoffmann's *Modern Magic* (1876) and Sach's *Sleight-of-Hand* (1877).

<sup>2</sup> Leo Rullmann was the first to mention in print that the real name of the author was "E. S. Andrews". See "Books of Yesterday", *The Sphinx*, November 1928. John Sprong, a sleight-of-hand devotee and gambling aficionado based in Chicago, apparently made this same discovery in the 1920s from inquiries he made. There are many theories on why the author used a pseudonym. See Hurt McDermott's article in this issue of *Magicol* for a compelling one.

emagical maven Martin Gardner.<sup>3</sup> His friend Vernon, the greatest sleight-of-hand magician of the twentieth century, and the man largely responsible for influencing multiple generations of card conjurors to study the book, refused to accept his friend's hypothesis. Many chided Vernon, and indicated that the "old man" just couldn't come to terms with the fact that the book he had studied for over eighty years was written by such a reprehensible character.

Vernon may not have gone to the investigative lengths to find the author as did his friends, but he had a deep insight into the mind and techniques of Erdnase. Each "artifice, ruse or subterfuge" consisted of tiny brushstrokes and, like an expert called upon to distinguish fact from forgery in the realm of high art, Vernon had an eye, an intuitive understanding if you will, for what constituted the hand of the author. Vernon stuck to his guns on Erdnase's identity, and I believe history will show his prescience.

Another candidate emerged in 2000 when David Alexander introduced Wilbur Edgerton Sanders to the magic community. Alexander, applying the skills he learned as a private detective, first developed a profile of Erdnase based on the style of writing exhibited in the book, and from the language and layout of the title page. Alexander determined that a college-educated man, with an interest in word play, a background

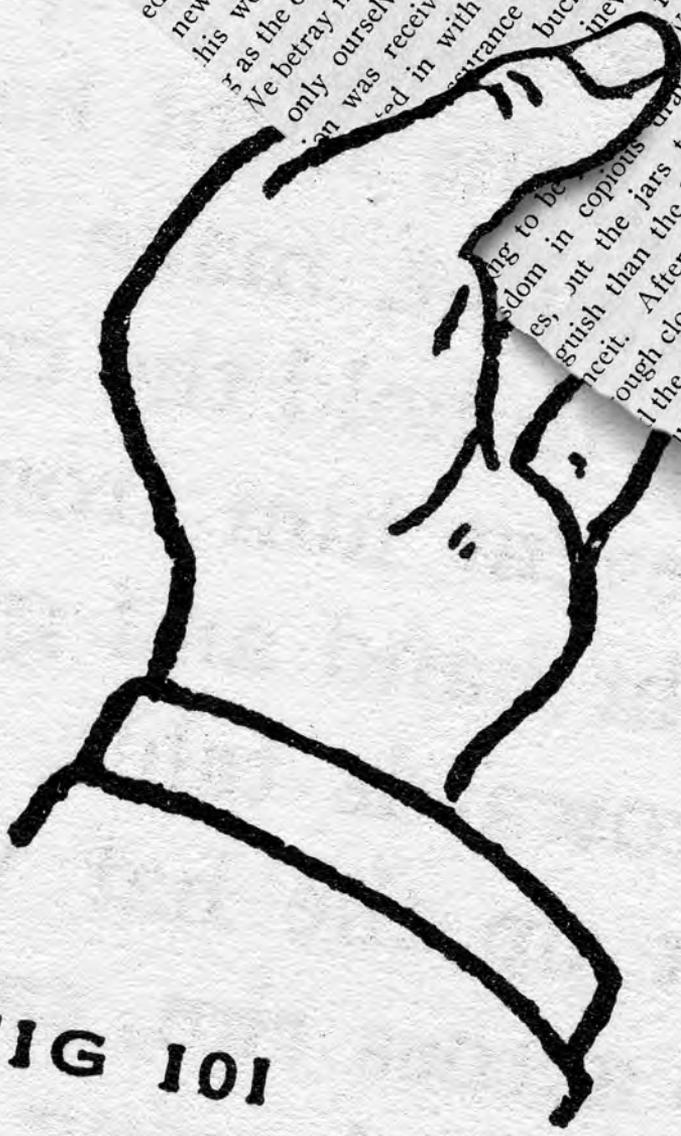


FIG 101

claim to know it all. Many profess  
ed their success by improving old methods  
his work; and as certain artifices are first  
as the originators are so disposed.  
We betray no confidences in publishing this book, h  
only ourselves to thank for what we know. Our  
man was received in the cold school of experience.  
ted in with the trusting nature of a fledgling,  
assurance born of overweening faith in our  
bucked the tiger voluntarily, and  
ing to be an inevitable result. A self-satisfied  
sdom in copious draughts at the customary sucker  
es, but the jars to our pocketbook caused far less  
guish than the heartrending jolts to our insufferable  
nceit. After the awakening our education progressed  
l the sum of our present knowledge is proffered  
ume, for any purpose it may answer, to f  
to the wise and the foolish, to the good  
all alike, with but one reservation,  
e. **Old Outs.**—Many mechanics

in mining and a need for anonymity, was most likely the author. He then sought out someone who fit the profile and eventually found Sanders.<sup>4</sup>

But the groundswell of support for Sanders did not truly surge until recently when Marty Demarest, a reporter for National Public Radio and a resident of Montana, picked up Alexander's thread and wove a tapestry from additional information culled from Sanders' diaries and from his well-documented family history as the son of the first senator of Montana.<sup>5</sup> Sanders' cachet is now so strong that some have declared the search over: special editions of *The Expert at the Card Table* that attribute authorship to Sanders have been offered for sale; commemorative decks of cards have been issued bearing his name; and an "Erdnaseum," a conference celebrating Sanders as the rightful author of *The Expert at the Card Table* was recently held in Sanders' hometown of Helena, Montana.

I believe, however, that Alexander's profile is flawed. As a result, as diligent as Demarest's research into Sanders may be, it too is flawed, at least as it relates to proving whether Sanders was the author of *The Expert at the Card Table*.

Alexander's profile is flawed because he based it on the language the writer used rather than on the techniques the writer described. And once Alexander determined that there was no one named E.S. Andrews who fit *his* profile, he manipulated the text on the title page to create a series of "coincidences" that gave him license to broaden his search and discover Sanders. Each subsequent manipulation of the text created more "coincidences," the cumulative effect of which, supporters argue, provide more than enough proof that Alexander bagged the right guy.

The content of the book and the nature of the techniques, however, tell us far more about the author than the style of writing ever will. Although not an infallible technique, profiling has its place and Alexander was the first Erdnase sleuth to adopt this approach. I suggest, however, that Alexander was not sufficiently familiar with the content of the book to extrapolate from it the information that could contribute to a profile. This is not particularly surprising—few are familiar enough with it. It takes decades of dedicated study to decipher its meaning and this was not Alexander's particular area of interest or expertise.<sup>6</sup>

By analyzing the techniques and tricks in the book rather than the style of writing or interpreting messages that may or may not be hidden in the title page, I came up with a completely different profile. Here it is.

First, a general comment about the writing: While the content is superb, there is little reason to believe the author had written or published anything of substance prior to *The Expert at the Card Table*. Though here and there the writing is pretty sharp and some of his lines have not only survived, but thrived in the last 100 years, the book is poorly organized, replete with technical and typographical errors, and

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4 David Alexander, "The Magician as Detective: New Light on Erdnase", *Genii*, January 2000.

5 Marty Demarest, "Unshuffling Erdnase", *Genii*, September 2011.

the illustrations—while perhaps advanced for gambling literature of the time—were not particularly helpful. It is evident that the book was self-published, and not because the author clearly stated so on the title page. It simply shares the defects of many self-published books, be they mimeographed manuscripts of magicians of the mid-twentieth century or the modern day equivalents produced by print on demand publishers like Lulu and Blurb. These flaws are probably one of the reasons the author



remained his inventory within a year of initial publication and the book was ignored for almost two decades.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising the book was self-published; the material strongly suggests, both in form and content, the author preferred to work alone.

Second, the content was drawn from two separate streams of literature: books related to card table artifice, and books pertaining to legerdemain. Again, not surprisingly, the author divided his own book into two sections with those headings exactly.

While the author was most likely familiar with gambling books by “reformed” gamblers such as Jonathan Green<sup>8</sup>, John Morris<sup>9</sup>, Mason Long<sup>10</sup>, George Devol<sup>11</sup>, and John Phillip Quinn<sup>12</sup>—books that transformed their authors from common criminals into motivational speakers warning the unwary on the evils of gam-

7 Other than William J. Hilliar who added an editorial comment about the availability of the book upon publication in *The Sphinx*, the first person of note to champion the book was perhaps T. Nelson Downs (or his ghost writer, John Northern Hilliard) who wrote on page 118 in *The Art of Magic* (1909), “For complete instruction in fancy cuts and shuffles, as well as in other artifices employed by those who woo the goddess of fortune at the gaming table, the reader may be referred to S. W. Erdnase’s excellent treatise, ‘The Expert at the Card Table.’” The next two references to the book in the magic literature were both European: Camille Gaultier described some of Erdnase’s techniques in 1914 in his book *La Prestidigitation sans appareils*, and Professor Hoffman (Angelo Lewis) followed suit with commentary in serial form in *The Magic Wand* (Vol. I, No. 1 to Vol. II, No. 13). The book only gained traction after Vernon promulgated its virtues by word and by example as he himself gained recognition from magicians in New York in the 1920s.

8 *An Exposure of the Arts and Miseries of Gambling* (1843)

9 *Wanderings of a Vagabond* (1873)

10 *The Converted Gambler* (1878)

11 *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi* (1887)

12 *Fools of Fortune* (1882)

bling—the gambling book that clearly provided him with the most inspiration was *How Gamblers Win* by “A Retired Professional”<sup>13</sup>. This slim tome, first published in 1865 was unapologetic in tone, and much more detailed in its technique than its predecessors. Its complete title was:

*How Gamblers Win; or, The Secrets of Advantage Playing Exposed. Being A Complete and Scientific Expose of the Manner of Playing All the various Advantages in the Games of Poker, All-Fours, Euchre, Vingt-Un, Whist, Cribbage, Etc. As Practiced by Professional Gamblers Upon the Uninitiated Together with A Brief Analysis of Legitimate Play. By A Retired Professional.*

In the first chapter, the Retired Professional writes,<sup>14</sup>

*The object of this treatise, however, is not to inquire whether card-games, fairly played, are, or are not, an innocent recreation – the common sense of the world at large having long since settled that question in the affirmative – but to explain the trickery whereby unfair players empty the purses of the simple and uninitiated. In making the following disclosures the writer does not profess to be inspired by any high-flown sentiments of philanthropy; neither has he any private wrongs to revenge, or feelings of remorse to appease. It is enough for the reader to be informed that he is practically conversant with his subject, that he knows whereof he speaks, and that all his expositions are founded on actual personal experience...*

*...And here let it be observed, that verdant amateurs who are victimized by professional gamblers, do not deserve the pity that is usually bestowed upon them. Green as they are, they bet to win, and they would make a sure thing of it if they could. The scientific skill and executive expertise which defeats them, they would, if similarly gifted, exercise without the slightest compunction for their own benefit.*

Although *How Gamblers Win* certainly influenced Erdnase, the section on Card Table Artifice in *The Expert at the Card Table*, published thirty-seven years later, was much more advanced. It not only provided an inventory of the techniques then in vogue, but it also explained new techniques, quirky techniques of the author’s own creation and, for perhaps the first time, a sophisticated *system* for cheating at cards.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> As Bart Whaley documents in *The Mysterious Gambler* (2008), an essay outlining the history of the book, its author—Gerritt M. Evans—and impact, Erdnase probably acquired a copy of the 1868 or later variant.

<sup>14</sup> *How Gamblers Win*, Magicana reprint of the 1868 edition, page 10.

<sup>15</sup> While some exclaim that Erdnase believed the “Greatest Single Accomplishment” of the advantage player was the bottom deal, a clear reading of the text on page 23 indicates that there is, in

The second stream of influence, the one that clearly inspired the section on Legendre, were books written by Professor Hoffmann<sup>16</sup>, Edwin Sachs<sup>17</sup> and August Roterberg.<sup>18</sup>

Some speculate that *The Expert at the Card Table* in fact had two authors, one for each section. I believe there was but one. Any distinction in the voice of the writer can be attributed to the fact that there were no technical descriptions of the sophisticated sleights Erdnase described in the first section embedded in the literature from which to crib, while there were plenty to choose from for the second. And, although it is evident the author was familiar with the work of Hoffmann, Sachs and Roterberg, he added technical nuance to virtually everything he described, the same sort of technical nuance he added to blind shuffles, cuts and shifts in the “Card Table Artifice” section.

Compare, for example, his re-engineering of the Hellis Change in the coda to his description of The Double-Palm Change with the original description of the Hellis by Hoffmann in *Modern Magic*.<sup>19</sup> Compare Erdnase’s handling of the Cards Up the Sleeve, using both sleeves, described in The Traveling Cards with Hoffmann’s description of the routine, inspired by Robert-Houdin, in *More Magic*.<sup>20</sup> Compare his Diagonal Palm Shift with its progenitor, The Diagonal Pass, from Sach’s *Sleight of Hand*.<sup>21</sup> Compare his handling for the card stab in The Diving Rod with Roterberg’s description of the effect and technique, The Pierced Card, in *New Era Card Tricks*.<sup>22</sup> This is sophisticated work. No Mutus, Dedit, Nomen, Cocis for this boy.<sup>23</sup>

Although Erdnase also probably learned The Back Hand Palm, The Excelsior Change and Penetration of Matter<sup>24</sup> from *New Era Card Tricks*, he had a certain disdain for its author.<sup>25</sup> When describing a full deck false shuffle, described in *More*

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fact, no such thing as a “greatest accomplishment” because “almost every ruse in the game is more or less dependent upon another one.”

16 *Modern Magic* (1876) and *More Magic* (1890)

17 *Sleight-of-Hand*, Second Edition, (1885)

18 *New Era Card Tricks* (1897)

19 To Change a Card, Sixth Method, *Modern Magic*, page 33.

20 *More Magic*, page 57.

21 The Diagonal Pass made its first appearance in the literature on page 96 of the “Second, and Greatly Enlarged, Edition” of *Sleight of Hand* published in 1885.

22 *New Era Card Tricks*, Page 136.

23 First described in *Nouvelles Recreations, Physiques et Mathematiques* (1740). Aside from being an incredibly trite trick, the fact that W. E. Sanders had to write the formula down in a notebook, and then correct it, speaks that he was probably shown the trick by someone else rather than possessed a copy of Hoffmann’s *Modern Magic* where it was also explained clearly.

24 Marshall D. Smith added his own technical change to Penetration of Matter: his illustration shows the performer holding the handkerchief in the left hand when the text clearly indicates that it should be held by the right.

25 If not Roterberg, then Houdini, another “clever card conjurer”.



Sincerely yours  
A. Roterberg

# MODERN MAGIC

A PRACTICAL TREATISE ON THE ART OF CONJURING



# NEW ERA CARD TRICKS

ROTERBERG



By PROFESSOR HOFFMANN

*Magic* by Hoffmann as a specialty of Charlier<sup>26</sup>, Roterberg wrote,

*As this method of apparently shuffling the entire pack is by far the best of all existing False Shuffles, the beginner need not trouble himself with learning any other method, as this one and a judicious combination of various trick Cuts, will answer for all occasions.*

Erdnase included the same false shuffle, but as an example of what *not* to do, chiding proponents of including it as follows:

*This process is very much employed by many clever card conjurers who ought to know better, and we include it only because it is in common use and to suggest its rejection....This clumsy juggling might prove satisfactory if performed by an awkward novice before a parcel of school children, but it appears simply ridiculous in the hands of a card conjurer, who, it is presumed, knows how to shuffle a deck in the customary manner, and with at least the degree of smoothness that any ordinary person might possess.*

As for the transformation that pundits are quick to attribute to Houdini, it is important to note that when P. T. Selbit described the move in his book *The Magician's Handbook* (1901), he merely thanked Houdini for his “knowledge” of the move. He did not attribute the creation of the move to him. It is entirely possible that Erdnase had shown the transformation to Houdini first while Houdini was standing in the shop of his friend August Roterberg—or in any of the other four or five magic shops in Chicago at the time Houdini was performing at Middleton's Clark St. Theatre (December 26, 1898 - January 21, 1899), well before he set sail for England (May 30, 1900.)<sup>27</sup> The transformation is exactly the type of sleight that Erdnase would have shown the self-acclaimed King of Kards, and it would be the type of currency that Houdini could use to impress other magicians, particularly on a foreign shore, in the manner that magicians have always traded secrets for status.

But let us now return to the “Card Table Artifice” section and see what the techniques tell us about Erdnase.

First, the sleight-of-hand is extremely sophisticated. It is also tremendously difficult. I would be surprised if there has been a single person in more than a hundred years since the book's initial publication who could perform everything in it in a manner that could defy detection. This means that the author was required to practice a lot. He would have had a deck of cards at hand—or in hand—throughout the day, and most likely held a “regular” job that permitted him to practice while at work in the

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<sup>26</sup> False Shuffles, Eighth Method, *More Magic*, page 14. It is also worth noting that Chapter V, which documents Charlier's system of card-marking, would have been of interest to Erdnase.

<sup>27</sup> See Frank Koval's *The Illustrated Houdini Research Diary*, Part 1: 1895-1899, for a complete timeline of pertinent dates.

same manner that those obsessed with sleight-of-hand, and who achieve success, usually practice all the time. T. Nelson Downs, for example, developed his technique while working as a telegraph operator for a railroad company; Ed Marlo practiced throughout the day at the injection molding firm where he was employed, and Derek Dingle and Fred Robinson were two more among many other superb sleight-of-hand artists who were also known for practicing while on the job. Vernon, the greatest sleight-of-hand artist of the twentieth century, did nothing else but practice, without any job at all, much to the detriment of his family.

Second, the author's system of locating, securing and stocking cards, blind shuffling, blind cuts and circumnavigating the cut, were designed for the sole practitioner. Yes, he flagged techniques and strategies for use with an ally, but ninety-five percent of the work was to be done solo. He needed no use of The Spread, a popular technique of the day not described in the text, because he did not want to rely on the skill or confidence of another. The author also worked clean. He could use any deck, at any time. He did not carry mechanical aids, such as machines and bugs, or daub or marked cards with him, articles that could be cumbersome or evidence of illegality. He makes a point in the book of disdaining them.

Third, although he was capable of doing sophisticated table shuffle work, his preference was the overhand shuffle. There are many reasons why he might have preferred to use this technique. It was the type of shuffle employed by the average person in most soft games, games outside the casino or clubroom. It still is. Also, he came up with an original system of culling cards with an overhand shuffle that is simply divine. It allowed him to survey the cards tabled in a game like poker –most often five-card stud back then, as opposed to draw – and, through a series of overhand shuffles, place the most desired cards where he wanted them to be. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, overhand shuffle work could be used in close quarters, where there was not much physical space in which to operate.

Players who riffle shuffle need table space, and prefer lots of it. With an overhand shuffle, the elbows are in. With a table shuffle, the elbows are extended outward. They take up space. Table space, or lack thereof, presents other challenges. It is harder to muck hands, that is, secretly switch cards in and out, or hold them out for extended periods of time. The angles are not conducive to the moves. (It is perhaps one of the reasons why the author did not explore these gambits in more detail.) Finally, it is simply much easier to shuffle cards overhand than on a table with the riffle shuffle, particularly if one's hands are in motion, as a fixed point of contact with the table is unnecessary.

Fourth, the author sometimes relied on “dalliance” with the deck; that is, a brief moment during the game when he could fiddle with the cards and set up a card or a hand for play.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Erdnase wrote on page 60, “If dalliance with the deck is allowed—and it is amazing how much of that sort of thing is permitted in some games—a practiced operator can run up one or two hands with incredible rapidity, and his actions will appear as mere trifling.”

Fifth, the author's modus operandi was to cultivate "advantages" that would, over the course of many rounds, provide greater opportunity for success. This meant a single bottom deal here, the knowledge of an opponent's hole card there, the turning up of a trump card at an opportune time. Although wagers could be large, experience shows that while the operator may have an advantage, there is no such thing as a sure thing.<sup>29</sup> He was content with modest returns on the advantages he created. Surely he would lose occasionally but, as he mentioned in the book, "the professional rarely squeals when he gets the worst of it."<sup>30</sup>

Sixth, he was prepared to play and cheat in a variety of games: Poker (stud and draw), Cassino, Whist, Hearts, Cribbage, Euchre, Coon Can, Pinochle, All Fours and Piquet. Interestingly, Erdnase's list of games includes games – Whist, Cribbage and such – that aren't considered traditional or hardcore gambling games, but are more socially acceptable. One could still win or lose money, however, playing these games.<sup>31</sup> The author must have had good social skills—an ability to engage with others and converse—to play this range of games. As a solo player, he also had to have the social skills to manage the money; that is, to encourage play but, at the same time, console opponents over losses and disengage them from play before a situation got out of hand.

Seventh, and finally, the author was not afraid to perform a trick or two. He was comfortable performing magic, and playing cards for money. His character was such that he was confident that no one would make a connection between his sleight-of-hand ability and his ability to cheat at cards.

One question the author does not address directly is: Who was his audience? The answer is simple: people with money. It was not just the question of who in the 1890s had money, but rather whose money he could take with relative impunity.

Developing a separate-but-related profile of the venues where the author was most likely to ply his trade will also assist us in developing a more complete profile of the author. So, according to my profile, the author needed:

- A place where he could practice at all hours;
- A place with a range of laymen, not just gamblers;
- A place where the space is tight or the conditions less than ideal; a place where he could rely on his system of culling and stocking with the overhand shuffle;
- A place where he would also have the opportunity to toy with the deck;
- A place where they played a variety of games;

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<sup>29</sup> I have dealt thousands of hands and have seen, on too many occasions, an opponent receive an extraordinary hand "by luck," one that ranked far above my meager advantage. If I had bet the farm on such an advantage, I would have been out on the street.

<sup>30</sup> Page 10.

<sup>31</sup> One of the reasons that Erdnase's book is of such value to the magic community is because the techniques can be applied in many scenarios.

- A place where he would not arouse suspicion if he won small amounts here and there;
- A place where he could perform a card trick or two; and
- A place, most of all, where people had money.

There were few places in America in the 1890s that could satisfy all these conditions. There was, however, at least one: the train.

In the 1890s, train travel was the mode of transportation for people with money.

Gaming literature prior to *The Expert at the Card Table* documents that trains were also the primary source for advantage play. Trains provided card cheats with a revolving door of people out to make their fortune or who were just returning with it. They had need, greed, ambition, and cash. “The rattlers” also provided hustlers with the perfect environment. Strangers could engage in small talk, and discover the nature not only of one another’s business, but also where and when they would be leaving the train.

Train travel wasn’t always smooth sailing and posed tough, unique challenges for a card cheat relying on sleight-of-hand. Cars jostled and swayed as they rode the rails. Further, although there was often a club car on the train where people could sit at a table and enjoy a drink, most passengers would while away the time, as they still do today, sitting beside or across from one another, in conversation or enjoying some leisure activity. Today it would be playing a game on a computer or smart phone. In the 1890s, it may have been playing cards: Whist, Euchre, Hearts, Pinochle or even Poker. No wonder the author developed techniques that could be applied with equal potency in all of these games and in these less than favorable conditions.

The train also provided the opportunity for dalliance with the deck. People would pass by and discover an acquaintance engaged in play, an attendant might offer a drink or a snack to a player in the club car or down the aisle of the coach, a player might reflect on the landscape scooting past the window of the car, or the game could be paused while the coachman punched the ticket of each person engaged in play before the train rolled into a station.

What is particularly revealing, however, is that our candidate was not interested in the big score. The traditional approach for card cheats who worked the trains was to “cold deck” the mark. The cheat would work with a partner or two, and once the target had been engaged, switch the deck at the point in the journey so that the mark would lose the bulk of their wealth on a wonderful hand just before the train arrived at its destination. The mob would then quickly disembark and scatter, only to repeat the process in a different direction. This was a high-risk method of operating, at least when compared to knowing your opponent’s hole card, or turning trump. The players also had a large overhead – train tickets for the posse with no guarantee that the mark would bite and, if he did, that he had the cash to make it all worthwhile. Further, when the score was successful, there could be much unwanted attention. The mob would have to scramble quickly and incur the cost of repeating the ruse

on another train in another direction, often just one step ahead of the authorities.

My Erdnase candidate didn't have to do that. He was content to win frequently, but modestly, in order to avoid suspicion. Although on the road – it was, after all, train travel – he would not have to venture far afield nor dodge the law. He could afford to win modestly because he had other employment that not only provided him with a base income but also gave him the opportunity to play cards frequently. He did not have much overhead, that is, costs he had to recoup before showing a profit from cheating. He did not require personnel to “cold deck” the target and his employer probably paid for his rail tickets. He may even have worked for the railroad. He was really an “advanced amateur,” who had a deep and abiding passion for the technique and artistry of cheating, not just getting the money.

Obviously, the author would not have been the first person who worked for a railroad who was also interested in fleecing customers. Thirty years ago, I became friends with Willis Kenney, a long-time card cheat who is now dead. Kenney was retired when I met him. He had worked for the railroad as a brakeman on a train between Toronto and Montreal. He took the job on the railroad because it gave him the opportunity to get into card games. And he took the job of brakeman because it gave him *even more* time to get into games. More amazingly, Kenney joined the railroad when he was nineteen—he was a pool hustler for three years before that—and he retired from the railroad at age sixty-five with a full pension. He was paid, and he found the time to play.

So, my candidate worked on a train. He kept his second profession a secret, while hiding his skill set behind a more relaxed blind of card magic. He would engage with people, and play the game at hand or of choice. He won, but modestly, to avoid arousing suspicion. He could board or disembark at will – all in the line of duty. He could also sit there, traveling between stations, with deck in hand and practice his craft. For those with curious eyes, he could show them a card trick or two. I have done exactly that: show a card trick on a boat, plane and train, to those who have inquired by word or gaze about my incessant shuffling.<sup>32</sup>

I think it's obvious my candidate worked on the railroad. But which one? Well, all tracks lead to Chicago.

*The Expert at the Card Table* was printed in Chicago. The artist who illustrated the book was based in Chicago. The author paid the artist by a check drawn on a bank account in Chicago. The copyright filed with the U.S. government on behalf of the author was returned to Chicago. The book was first mentioned in a magic magazine, *The Sphinx*, published in Chicago. The distribution of the book was handled through Chicago. After the book was remaindered, the plates for the printing of the book were sold to a publisher in Chicago.

Chicago tolerated illicit activity, and provided a safe haven for gamblers and

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<sup>32</sup> I often perform Vernon's “Out of Sight, Out of Mind” because the passenger can note a card from across the aisle and I can still divine it. Vernon developed this, of course, from Erdnase's “A Mind Reading Trick”, page 194.

gambling dens, among other vices, as local politicians and the police turned a blind eye to the Comstock Laws.<sup>33</sup> Even more importantly, people and money flowed in and out of the city with great regularity. In 1893, the World's Fair was held in the city, and that certainly contributed to its growth. Chicago was the economic hub of the Midwest. Its network of railways provided the link between the East Coast and the West. It also became, because of its location, the stockyard for the nation, where ranchers and meat processors bought and sold livestock for cash and other consideration. Trains brought them to and fro.

Now, to put the profile together:

My candidate is a man named E.S. Andrews<sup>34</sup>, born between 1855 and 1860.<sup>35</sup> He developed an interest in gambling at an early age and played Faro, then the most popular and corrupt card game in America. He developed an interest in sleight-of-hand techniques for use in gambling and magic by reading Evans' *How Gambler's Win* (1865, 1868) and Hoffmann's *Modern Magic* (1876). Early evans gave him the opportunity to practice while at work, and he spent an enormous number of hours perfecting sleights and developing his own. He acquired a copy of the second edition of Sach's *Sleight-of-Hand* (1885) and Hoffmann's follow-up to *Modern Magic*, *More Magic* (1890).

By this time, if not earlier, he started working for a railroad company. It is unclear whether he took the job to get into card games or whether he had the job first and then discovered it provided a great opportunity for a second income. He developed a series of techniques that represented advances in card table artifice first explained in *How Gamblers Win*, including a system of using jogs and breaks for overhand shuffle work, and a system for culling and stocking cards with that shuffle. He also developed a series of techniques and presentations for magic. His techniques and strategies were designed to avoid suspicion at all cost. He did not want to jeopardize the opportunity he had to practice, to play on the job and to earn some extra money. His ability as a conversationalist had him interacting with the public and, given his intellect and ability to engage with people, he advanced in his career with the railroad.

He lived in or around Chicago and acquired Roterberg's *New Era Card Tricks* when it was published in 1897<sup>36</sup>. Some event occurred in his life between 1897 and 1901 that added financial pressure. Although he augmented his income through card table artifice, it was not enough. Andrews decided to write a book about card table artifice and legerdemain, based on his then twenty years of experience. The book would

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33 See Hurt McDermott's article "Erdnase in Chicago" in this issue of *Magical*.

34 Based on comments of Leo Rullman and John Sprong.

35 Based on the recollection of Marshall D. Smith, the illustrator of *The Expert at the Card Table* and the one person who had a face-to-face encounter with the author.

36 Hatch indicated in "August Roterberg 'Dealer in Reliable Magical Apparatus'" in *The Perennial Mystics*, #17—Part 3, October 31, 2004, that, despite the copyright date of 1897, *New Era Card Tricks* was most likely available in Roterberg's shop in early December 1896. Houdini's copy, for instance, was inscribed to him by Roterberg and dated December 6, 1896.

Dr. Jacob Daley

If <sup>all</sup> books in ~~com~~ were  
to be destroyed and I  
was given an opportunity  
to salvage only one -  
this would be it.

In my humble opinion  
I ~~can~~ still consider "The  
Expert at the Card Table"  
the greatest treatise on  
the science and art of  
manipulating cards ever  
written and I doubt if it  
will be ever equaled. J. Daley  
1/27/40.

Inscription by Dr. Jacob Daley in a copy of *The Expert* owned by the late Larry Jennings. Courtesy of Gabe Fajuri.

take time to write. He had never written a book before and he still had to maintain his regular employment, his soft card games, practice regimen, and who knows what other responsibilities. He also decided to write the book under a pseudonym, not just for protection from the Comstock Laws but, more importantly, so that he could maintain his job with his employer, and the cover it provided him to cheat in games. He created the pseudonym S. W. Erdnase by simply reversing the letters in his name; E. S. Andrews became S. W. Erdnase.

Using *How Gamblers Win* and magic books such as *Modern Magic*, *Sleight-of-Hand*, *More Magic* and *New Era Card Tricks*<sup>37</sup> as his models, he completed the manuscript in late 1901 and sought an illustrator. He hired Marshall D. Smith in January 1902 to draw images based from life, with the cards in his hands. He rented a hotel room as a studio where he could pose without interruption for the illustrations and he paid Smith with a check from a recently opened bank account.

With no prior publishing experience, Andrews took the unedited and poorly organized manuscript, and Smith's illustrations, to a printer, James McKinney & Co. McKinney inserted a copyright notice based on the language used in another print job<sup>38</sup>, printed the book and then, as a courtesy, sent the certificate of copyright to the proper U.S. government office.

With no prior experience advertising or distributing books, and restrictions on his ability to promote the book—he was still employed by the railroad company—he dropped off copies at the various Chicago-based magic dealers with the hope the books would sell. The copy placed with Vernelo's magic shop was given to William J. Hilliar, editor of *The Sphinx*, which was published out of the shop. Hilliar made a passing reference to the publication in the pages of *The Sphinx*, but not until the September issue, some seven months after the book's initial publication.

In February 1903, the author sold the remaining stock at a price that allowed dealers to offer it to their customers at 50% off its original cover price. As the publication was considered a failure, and the author had both regular and irregular employment (cheating), he continued to work for the railroad and profit from the pasteboards.

In 1999 Richard Hatch, an indefatigable researcher and one of the magic community's most respected scholars, reviewed the information assembled by Gardner, having access in particular to Gardner's correspondence with Marshall D. Smith. Hatch then followed leads that Gardner, at his advanced age, no longer had the energy to follow. Over the past twelve years, as new technology begat new leads or clarity to previous ones, Hatch expanded the list of potential candidates and arrived at the conclusion that a *different* Andrews than Milton Franklin—Edwin S. Andrews—was the prime candidate.<sup>39</sup>

Hatch's candidate fits the technique-based profile perfectly. He had the right name and was the right age; he held positions with a railroad company that initially gave him the opportunity to practice (telegraph operator and ticket agent) and then get into games (traveling passenger agent). He was in and out of Chicago frequently for business, and had several ties to the city. Losing his first wife in 1897, leaving him

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37 Tom Ransom noted that the title page of *New Era Card Tricks* stated that the book was "Published by the Author" and "Price \$2.00", language Erdnase adopted for the title page of his own book.

38 As the book was never submitted for copyright in either England or Canada, it is most likely that a person cut and pasted the language from another book, without any understanding of its full legal significance, into *The Expert at the Card Table*.

39 The Hatch field of candidates first appeared in "Searching for Erdnase" in *MAGIC*, December 1999. He has narrowed the field to one primary candidate, Edwin S. Andrews, as described in this issue of *Magicol*.

with two young children, motivated him to write the book. (His subsequent second marriage to Dollie Seely a year later may provide the connection to the Dalrymple family for which Erdnase scholars have been searching.<sup>40</sup>) According to Hatch, his candidate returned to Chicago in October 1901 only to be transferred out of the city to San Francisco in February 1903 – the month the books were remaindered. He lived nine blocks from the Atlas Novelty Co, one of the companies that offered the book at the deep discount. Finally, as Bill Mullins recently discovered, he had some history with playing cards.

Hatch's candidate died in San Jose, California, on September 12, 1922, at age sixty-three—just as the value of *The Expert at the Card Table* was about to be discovered by a new generation, and eight years before the copyright in the work would lapse into the public domain. Letters filed in probate court indicated that Hatch's candidate, Edwin S. Andrews, was “also known as E.S. Andrews”.

In civil law, cases are decided on a balance of probabilities—that is, whether or not the plaintiff can establish a 51% chance of being in the right. In criminal matters, the burden of proof is much higher. It has to be established beyond a reasonable doubt, which is generally interpreted as greater than a 90% probability, that the accused committed the crime. We are not convicting the author of *The Expert of the Card Table* of a felony—although we probably could—but we still need to be satisfied on a 90% probability basis that we have the right man.

Although we may never know for certain whether *this* E.S. Andrews was the author of the book, the convergence of the two streams of investigation, one based on a new profile of the author, the other built on Hatch's impeccable research, establish beyond a reasonable doubt the identity of the author.

If I could call on two people from the past, the first would be Edwin S. Andrews so that he could congratulate Richard Hatch for being the first to discover that he was S.W. Erdnase, the author of *The Expert at the Card Table*. The second would be Charles Mackay, who would surely find the search for Erdnase and, in particular, the recent groundswell of support for Wilbur Edgerton Sanders as the author of *The Expert*, worth including in a new edition of his own seminal work, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*.

*I would like to thank Richard Hatch, Karl Johnson, Tom Ransom, Dr. Gene Matsuura and Julie Eng for their assistance in preparing this article.*

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40 According to Hatch, Seely was also the maiden name of Adelia Seely, the mother of Louis Dalrymple. We are waiting to hear from the genealogist for the Dalrymple family whether there is a relationship between the two. See Hatch's article in this issue of *Magicol*.