

[Managing Editor's Note: The following article was written in 2007 by the late Stanley M. Aronson, MD, founding dean of Brown Medical School, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*.]

A Brief Chronicle of Appendicitis

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EHRICH WEISS WAS BORN ON MARCH 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary, one of seven Weiss children. His father, a rabbi, was recruited by a congregation in Appleton, Wisconsin, and in 1889 the family left Europe and migrated to the American

In 1892, at age 21, Ehrich Weiss declared himself to be a magician and, accordingly, changed his name to Harry Houdini after the renowned 19th-century French magician, Jean Robert-Houdin.



Houdini jumps from Harvard Bridge, Boston, 1908. John H. Thurston, photographer. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

Midwest. Ehrich, called Harry by his family, was short, five feet and five inches, but otherwise physically active, with a love of sports and a fascination for traveling circuses. When the family moved to New York City, a youthful Ehrich worked briefly as a locksmith's apprentice and in his free time he sought employment as a trapeze-artist with one of the local circuses.

Houdini's career blossomed, particularly because of his inventive escape acts, freeing himself from jails, chains, handcuffs, straitjackets and even from locked, water-filled tanks.

By 1914, Houdini had reached the pinnacle of his career as an illusionist and escape artist, performing to enthusiastic audiences throughout Europe and

PROVIDENCE, R. I., NOVEMBER 22, 1925.

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F. R. WENDELSCHAEFER MGR.

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PRICES, Plus Tax: Evenings and Thursday Matinee, 50c to \$1.50. Wednesday and Saturday Matinees, 50c to \$1.00.

This advertisement appeared in the *Providence Journal* in 1925, advertising Houdini's appearance that year.

North America. He now added two parallel vocations: he shared his prestidigitational secrets with both the British and American Secret Services during the first World War; and, by 1920, he invested his energies and resources in debunking so-called psychics and mentalists. This pursuit cost him the friendship of Arthur Conan Doyle, who was an implacable believer in spiritualism.

Houdini's final performance took place in Detroit's Garrick Theater on October 24, 1926. After a strenuous performance he retired to his dressing room couch. A student from McGill University, J. Gordon Whitehead, entered and asked Houdini if it was true that his abdominal muscles were strong enough to withstand blows of a human fist. Without waiting



Harry Houdini shown in chains in photos taken in 1899 and early 1900s.

[PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]



for a reply, Whitehead struck Houdini's abdomen repeatedly with his fists until others restrained him. On the following day Houdini complained of nausea and abdominal pain. He sought admission to Grace Hospital. A diagnosis of appendicitis was made and surgery revealed an inflamed, ruptured appendix. Peritonitis developed and Houdini died on the afternoon of October 31 [Halloween], 1926. He was 52 years old. Most physicians declared that the blows to his abdomen played little if any role in his encounter with appendicitis.

Appendix in medical history

The human appendix, a vestigial structure with no known current function, is an inconspicuous worm-like extension of the ascending segment of the large intestine. It is rarely more than three inches in length. And while the appendix

was clearly illustrated in the anatomical drawings of da Vinci [1492] and in the anatomy texts of Vesalius [published

in 1543], the structure was not specifically named in any anatomy publication until the writings of the Italian anatomist, Berengario Da Carpi in 1521.

The first clinical recognition of disease of the appendix is assigned to an 1812 scientific paper written by a London physician, James Parkinson [1755–1824], who described a five-year-old boy suffering from acute abdominal pain associated with nausea. The child died within two days of the onset of the pains. An autopsy disclosed intense inflammation confined to the appendix and Parkinson coined the word *appendicitis* to give the disease an identity. This was the same physician who wrote extensively on the need for democratic reform in England [he was charged with high treason by King George III]. He

also published extensively on geology, paleontology and authored, in 1817, "An Essay on the Shaking Palsy", now commonly known as Parkinson's disease.

A brief paper by Francois Melier added further autopsy-derived verification of appendiceal inflammation as a cause for pain in the right lower quadrant of the abdomen. But it wasn't until June, 1886, when Reginald Heber Fitz, MD, [1843–1913], Professor of Pathological Anatomy at Harvard, offered a scientific paper, "Perforating Inflammation of the Vermiform Appendix: With Special Reference to its Early Diagnosis and Treatment," that the disease became widely recognized. The recognition was not total, however. In 1897, Dr. Harvey Cushing, then in training in surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, made the diagnosis of acute appendicitis on himself. Few of his superiors believed it and Cushing, after 22 hours of searching, finally found a surgeon brave enough to operate. The diagnosis was confirmed and Cushing went on to become this nation's most prominent surgeon in the early decades of the 20th century. ❖