

Arthur Hartley Gross a.k.a. "Victor St. Leon" The Dean of Sacramento Magic

The Lota Bowl has run dry and the magic wand is now broken. Our founding father, who was our inspiration to try a little harder and to raise our magical art to a higher plain, is now gone. Arthur 'Victor St. Leon' Gross has left this earthly stage to join the Supreme Master Magician of the Universe for a bigger show starring all the greats in magic! And Art definitely deserves the role, as he was a great magician and an outstanding person.

Lee Grabel said, "Art is one of the true unsung heroes of magic. Victor St. Leon was a great performer and teacher of magic." While life long friend, Sid Fleischman summed it up by saying, "The word wasn't in use yet, but I think Art had us all beat in stage charm and charisma."

The Great Victor St. Leon was in all our hearts during last year's Holiday Party, even though he could not attend due to health issues. So everyone gathered for a photo to present to him at the end of the party. He must have known that friends were thinking about him that Saturday, because he responded better that evening while in the hospital than he had for a few days. His family gathered around as they shared magical moments together. The next morning on Sunday, December 14, 2008, around 4 AM, he left this earthly toil.

Anyone who met Art and saw him perform, came away influenced by this 'pro' that had paid his dues and was now willing to share his experiences. Like most of us, Art started life at an early age, but more importantly for all of us, the magic bug bit him at an early age.

Art has been a part of the Sacramento magic scene ever since moving to Sacramento around 1947. Entertainment had always been a part of Art's life since his childhood in Milwaukee where he was born Arthur Hartley Gross on February 11, 1920. His two older half-brothers were theatre managers there, which gave him a chance to visit many shows and see magicians perform. They were the ones who gave him his first magic set at age seven.

A couple of years later, he and his recently divorced mother, moved to Pomona, California where Art made a discovery as great as finding gold at Coloma. There was this marvelous place called the LIBRARY and they carried

books on magic! His love of magic swelled as he searched out all the books on magic that he could find.

At the age of twelve, he and his mother finally arrived in Oakland after spending some time with her aunt in Stockton, California. The year was 1932. Here is where the young Mr. Gross met some of the fellows that would become his lifelong buddies in magic. There was Lloyd Jones, Harold Agnew, Murray Rosenthal, Arthur "Francisco" Bull, Sid Fleischman, Pete Biro and even Mrs. Harry Houdini. Art studied magic as hard as he did his school studies, maybe even harder. He thus became friends with other Bay Area magicians "Poogie Poogie" Alstrand, Clarence Slyter, Jimmy Muir, Senor Maldo, Prof. El Tab, Carl-Lyle, Ormond McGill and many others.

In 1938, Art graduated from Technical High School in Oakland and was developing an act that was not only technically sound, but also very entertaining. Part of this was due in no small part to a fellow who worked for the WPA doing magic classes and taught magic at the YMCA. This was Murray Rosenthal who had been head assistant to the Great Leon and assisted Arthur 'Francisco' Bull. Murray took an interest in young Arthur and encouraged his magic. This may have been due to the fact that Art introduced Murray to his mother at one of the magic events. They dated and finally married, resulting in this fine gentleman and magical mentor becoming Art's stepfather. Art said that Murray was a very good father to him since he was interested in magic.

Having met several magicians and under the tutelage of Mr. Rosenthal, Art joined the Oakland Magic Circle when he was sixteen. He learned to do a mental code act with Murray and they worked several dates together. Art worked as a professional magician doing close-up, mental and platform magic from 1938-1942. He performed his platform act three times a night and worked mostly at **Monaco's** and **The Riviera** in San Francisco, which were actually theatre restaurants.

When the *1939 World's Fair* came to Treasure Island he performed in *Greenwich Village*. And, when it went bust, *Sally Rand's "Gay Paris."* This lasted for about 6 months. Art remembered Sally Rand well, "She's a tough little broad," he said with a laugh. You had to belong to the union if you wanted to work on the midway. He recalled her comment during a union meeting at the fair, "You know the only time I really made any money was when I took my pants off!" Again with a laugh and broad smile on his face.

Art worked the midway along with Charlie Miller, Lee Grabel, Sally Rand and several others. Boy did he have stories to share about this fair! One of his vivid memories was being mesmerized by the Princess Kanza Omar. Art describes her in his own words, "Princess Kanza Omar and her Desert Dancers'. It was really good! They had Arabian musicians and three or four girls that did some Arabian dances. That one Kanza, Kanza Omar, not only was she good looking, but she did the dandiest. She would stand there almost like motionless and her whole body would start to quiver. She had like a rhinestone costume and it would ... (Now here Art would get a gleeful look and shake his hands in an hour glass shape imitating the shimmering that went over Kanza's body) as his vivid memory came to life for you.

The World's Fair is where Art was given his stage name. Now Art worked the bally for *Greenwich Village* and it was his job to build the tips. In other words, he was responsible for gathering the next group of 'marks' to pay to see the next sideshow. Art performed while the 'talker' gave the actual spiel to grab the fair patron's attention.

Art had never worked Carney. So the guy said, "What name do you use?" When he was a kid he used Arturo, but didn't say so. Art was like 19 and said, "*I don't care what you call me as long as you pay me! Soooo... It started off as Edward St. Victor, Victor St. Edward, Edward St. John, and finally just settled in to Victor St. Leon. They had two or three talkers. And then they had a big union deal going on. The American Federation of Actors had some sort of grafting going on, so they busted away and became the American Federation of Variety Artists, which took in carnivals, nightclub performers, vaudeville, rodeos, circuses or anything that wasn't really actors or musicians. And that is when my union card said Victor St. Leon.*"

After the World's Fair, he toured with Arthur "Francisco" Bull up and down the west coast and across the mid-west assisting in *Francisco's Midnight Spook Frolic*. Again Art shared many tales from these adventures that kept you in stitches. Art and Cas Boxley were both assisting Arthur Bull during this period. Mr. Bull would write the show lineup on the stage apron in chalk. Art, being the fun loving person that he was, would add his own message during the run of the show. One of his favorites was, '*you're fly is open*' and Mr. Bull would fall for it every time. He would stop in the routine, turn and check to make sure

his fly was closed. He then turned back around and gave Art a look, which just filled Art and Cas with glee!

It was during their trip back home in 1941, for Christmas shows around the Oakland Bay Area, that Art found out about the attack on Pearl Harbor. He believed they were traveling through Omaha, Nebraska when he looked out the car window and saw the newspaper headline, **“War Declared!”**

Art tried to join the Marines but they would not take him because of his eyes, neither would the Navy nor Army. Art had always wanted to be a theatre manager like his brothers so he said, “Up your ass” and ignored them. Eventually he got into managing theatres and playing nightclubs. He met a gal who saw him in a nightclub who was managing the Alameda Theatre on Alameda Island and Art got a job as the assistant managing the theatre. Art then met a lovely young lady by the name of Ruth Schreiber who was the head usherette. They hit it off and were eventually married on October 29, 1942. Just three days after he was married he got his induction notice. Fourteen days later he was inducted in the Army. Such is life! They had three children together: Ronald, Susan and Kenneth. Ruth preceded Art in death on April 14, 2006 after 60 years of marriage.

Murray Rosenthal took Art down to the railroad station as he headed for his induction at the Presidio in Monterey. After boot camp, Art ended up in the Signal Corp, and got transferred to a “S.I.A.M.” outfit at Fort Flagler near Port Townsend, Washington. There were only two ‘signal information and monitor’ units in the whole army. One was in Europe, and Art was in the other unit overlooking beautiful Puget Sound. From one of his posts he could see Mt. Rainier, the Cascade Range, Bellingham, Washington and Vancouver Island on a good day. Their monitoring was mostly all electronic code versus the ‘Cherokee Talkers’ who used all audio code. He was later transferred to the Philippines to serve out the rest of his tour of duty.

After 3 years 4 months and 11 days, Art returned to the Bay Area as a civilian. He went back to managing theatres in Alameda, California, as they had to give him his job back since he served in the military. The Nasser Brothers, of Syrian decent, ran four theatres in Alameda and five in San Francisco. They got along very well with Art. His district manager, Billy, was the son of one of the brothers and a real work of art, to put it politely. Mr. Gross finally got fed up

with his antics and told him to do his own work. Art then took the job of relief manager and worked shifts managing four different theatres in the area.

His time in Oakland and Alameda was a real fun time for him with the movie theatres and all the magicians in the area. However, he could see the job was not going much beyond that of theatre manager (Unless he stole from them or unless he made some mistake, he could work there forever). It was just a "bitch," he said! So, he quit and got a job selling insurance and later, weather stripping. This resulted with Art doing sales for a building materials company. Art was then given the opportunity to move to Sacramento around 1947, to work a branch office. He continued in the trade working for Atlas Shower Door until his retirement. During all of his Sacramento years, Art performed magic shows for lodges, banquets and casual dates while raising his family.

Art Gross became very active in Sacramento's magic club, *The Mystics of Sacramento* as one of their top performers and mentoring others. Many a Saturday morning, young magicians could be found over at his home, eager to learn the magical arts, as they took lessons from the master. Art taught magic to many of the magicians in the Greater Sacramento Area and was always willing to help out another performer.

He was a charter member when *The Mystics of Sacramento* affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Magicians. He was also a charter member when Assembly #72 of the Society of American Magicians was re-organized. He was their first president. For a number of years, through out the 1970s, '80s and '90s he was the Territorial Representative for the I.B.M. In appreciation for all that he had done to elevate the art of magic in Sacramento over the years, they renamed I.B.M. Ring #192 the **Victor St. Leon Ring #192** in his honor. Art officially became our Dean of Magic on March 13, 1990, and was a member of the Order of Merlin Shield, for 39 years of membership in the I.B.M.

Art started sharing his magic early on. Back in the 1941 *Tops Magazine*, Art shared his patter for the Sucker Napkins with the magic fraternity. Later Don Lawton was to quote Victor St. Leon's presentation as one of the best and most practical for working magicians. Shortly there after, he had an article in *The BAT*, which was put out by his friend Lloyd Jones. Here he explained his Razor Blade Switch, Nest of Boxes and Wandering Card presentations.

Sacramento's Secret Seven also got its start with Art's influence. This was a select group of local magicians who gathered on Saturdays and attendance was by invitation only. He would call the fellows up and ask, "Do you want to Magish?" In this group were Gary Beutler, Don Banks, Jim Lambert, Lehman Forrester, John Heinen, George Westwood and Steve Ehlers. The number seven was a magical number, which would change from time to time. These fellows were all very serious about the various intricacies of close-up finger flinging magic!

Sharing the magic was always Art's way. Whether he was performing, teaching or cutting up jackpots, he had a twinkle in his eye and an infectious laugh. He always had a deck of cards nearby. His favorite routines included card fan manipulations, Sympathetic Silks, Linking Rings and the Hindu Burnt and Restored Turban. Art Gross had magic in his veins for over 80 years; he was just shy of his 89th birthday.

A Celebration of Life with a Broken Wand Ceremony for Art Gross was on Monday, January 19, 2009, at the Northminster Presbyterian Church in Sacramento, CA. It was a full house as many friends gathered to share fond memories and antidotes about our friend and mentor, Victor St. Leon. Art had so many bits of witticism, but at the end of every show his farewell was, "Thanks for the use of the hall!"

Submitted by Dale Lorzo

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Art Gross Photograph Descriptions:

- 1939 Art @ Treasure Island.tif
Victor St. Leon working the Bally @ San Francisco World's Fair with Siamese Twins
- 1939 Victor St. Leon & Silk Cabby5x7 sepia copy.tif
St. Leon performing the Silk Cabby
- 1940 Bob Muse, Art, Buddy Ryan.tif
Bob Muse (Ray Muse's son), Art Gross, 'Buddy' Ryan (also worked on Francisco's Spook Show)
- 1940s Art Gross & Shirley Keeler 4x6.tif
St. Leon & his assistant
- 1944 Oct28 Art & Don Columbia, SC.tif
Relaxing at the bar with buddy Don Ellenberg, friends for 65 years
Stationed at Columbia, South Carolina in the Army
- 1975 Art & Hindu Turban.tif
Art recreating his performance of the Burnt & Restored Hindu Turban
Dave Fiscus, Art Gross, Brian Sutton
- 1976 Art Gross & Dai Vernon Banquet.tif
Dai Vernon's 1976 lecture in Sacramento. Art performed at banquet for Vernon
- 1985 Art Gross in Magic Room.tif
Art having fun at home in the Magic Room
- 1990 Victor St. Leon Ring Plaque.tif
Plaque presented to Art when Ring 192 was renamed the 'Victor St. Leon Ring 192'
- 1999 Art,Calvert&Stillman.tif
Art Gross, John Calvert, Phil Stillman after Calvert's lecture
- 2000 Art 80 BD.tif
Art celebrating his 80th Birthday
- 2005 VictorSt.Leon&DonBanks.tif
Art presented Founder Award by Don Banks
From Ring 192 for his continued support
- Art- Linking Rings.tif
Art presenting one of his favorite routines
- Art- Secret 7 & Roger Klause.tif
Sacramento's Secret Seven Meeting: Gary Beutler, Don Banks, George Westwood, Art Gross, Mike Maxwell, Roger Klause, Jim Lambert and Lehman Forrester.