



# WILLIAMS MAGIC: BRINGING THE STORE TO YOU

By Emory Williams Jr.

The Great Depression was in full swing and life was hard. Most people were more concerned with making a living than with finding entertainment. Magic shows were very rare, and magic shops were almost non-existent.

Howard Thurston, Harry Blackstone Sr., Dante – those were a few of the famous magicians of the day, performing in distant places.

One couldn't just drive down the street to see a magic show, or buy a trick from the local magic shop. It was



Claudia & Emory Jr.

a time when magic secrets were usually passed from person to person, generation to generation. There was no Internet, and there were no magic chat rooms!

That's where this story begins. It was the 1930s, before the invention of television, when a man living in a small southern Missouri town learned a few simple magic tricks to entertain his family and friends. Practically every Saturday relatives and neighbors from nearby farms would visit just to be entertained by his magic.

The youngest of his twelve children (yes, twelve children!) watched in awe as his dad enthralled everyone. That youngest child was Emory Williams, and by the time he was in the seventh grade he began performing magic under the name "Magic Mr." at school functions.

The nearest magic shop was located in Memphis, Tennessee, over one hundred miles south of Emory's home. The next nearest shop was in St. Louis, Missouri, over two hundred miles north of his home. Not an easy thing to "drop in" and see what new tricks might be available.

Emory's interest in his hobby took a more serious turn in the early 1940s when he traveled to St. Louis to study with an apprentice of Howard Thurston. This simple beginning led him into a lifetime of magic.

He married his high school sweetheart (Nathailia) and held various jobs to pay the bills. He worked for a vending company and as a projectionist in a local theater, but magic was where his heart was. He taught Nathailia his magic, and



Nathailia & Emory 1953



Current magic shop in Tucson, Arizona

they soon began traveling through Missouri, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Michigan, performing magic for schools, churches, and pretty much anyone who would pay them.

Dad began teaching magic to me (Emory Jr.) when I was about five years old. That first trick was a simple color-changing pocketknife that I always carried in my pocket, and which has since become a life-long favorite. I occasionally performed with my parents (including two shows before audiences of about 8,000 each in Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri, in the late 1960s) until I graduated from high school and went away to college in England. I then moved to California, where I eventually got married and settled down.

In the 1960s, while living in Caruthersville, Missouri (population under 5,000), Emory Sr. and Nathailia turned their home aquarium hobby into a retail pet shop. It wasn't long before they began bringing in a small amount of magic to sell to interested customers. The magic side of the business rapidly grew to the point they started their own magic club for local enthusiasts.

In 1988 they sold the pet business, packed up their remaining magic inventory, and moved to Tucson, Arizona, intending to retire from business; they unknowingly moved into a very active magic community that already had a local magic shop by the name of Alexander's Magic. It was the only place for magic in Tucson.

Emory's primary concern was determining where to live in the Tucson area. He and Mom bought three acres of desert land about thirty miles southeast of town and "temporarily" moved into a sixteen-foot camping trailer with all their furniture, personal belongings, and magic inventory stored in an old box truck they parked on their property. That little camper became their home for the next twelve years while Dad built their home from the ground up...in his "spare" time!

His spare time turned out to be early mornings only, because in 1989 they decided to open a small storefront for a brief period of time and sell off their remaining magic inventory to help fund their retirement and home-building venture. They rented a five-hundred-square-foot retail space in Tucson and set up shop (again). The same week they opened their doors, a proverbial "little old lady" drove her car through the front wall of the other magic

shop (Alexander's) causing it to close. There were no injuries, but the shop never re-opened. No, they had nothing to do with that accident; they didn't even know Alexander or the little old lady. At least that's their story, and they're sticking to it!

With a nice display of magic in their new shop, and a casual gathering table in the center of the shop where complimentary refreshments were always available, local magicians began to hang out on a regular basis. The atmosphere was completely different from Alexander's and they had a much larger inventory immediately upon opening. Customers often asked them to special order additional supplies they needed; as a retailer Emory Sr. couldn't just order one of an item, he had to order two or twelve or more. This caused their inventory to actually grow instead of shrink as they had hoped.

They began to actively support the local magic clubs by video taping all the public magic shows for archival purposes and contributing to the clubs' fundraising activities with magic items to be raffled off. Members of both local clubs were offered ongoing discounts off all purchases and new customers were encouraged to join the two clubs.

It was around this time that Dad decided to stop performing for hire because he didn't want to be in competition with his magician customers who were trying to earn extra income through their performances. He turned his attention to serving them by providing the tools and supplies they needed to be successful. This promoted a truly symbiotic relationship between the magic shop and the local magicians.

They quickly outgrew the original Tucson storefront and in 1992 they expanded to the space next door, tripling their size. A special "magicians only" lounge was included in the new space, as well as a small stage that could be used for classes, practice sessions, and media interviews. Magicians were encouraged to hang out and use the shop as a central clearinghouse for information exchange. Local magicians were also assigned their own "mail bins" at the shop where they could leave messages and small items for each other.

Business continued to grow; in 1995 they expanded again with another five hundred square feet. Today they occupy two thousand square feet where they operate the brick-and-mortar shop, an Internet business, and a mail-order business. Their focus is on magic – no costumes, no Halloween "stuff."

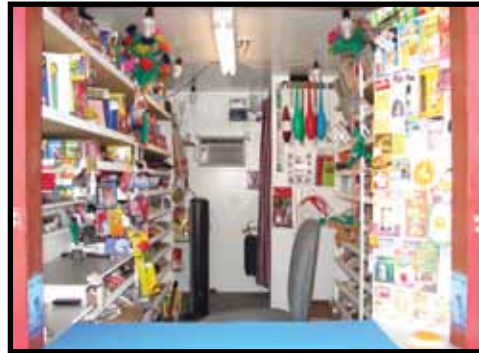
In 1996, my wife Claudia and I moved from Southern California to Tucson to become involved full-time in the magic business. I also decided to stop performing publicly and to focus on marketing the business. In 2008, I came up with an idea to open a small, remote location; we custom built a portable building on wheels and expanded the business into Vail, Arizona, located about twenty-five miles southeast of Tucson. Though small (about one hundred square feet), the magic trailer is well stocked for both beginners and professionals

With many brick-and-mortar magic shops going out of business because of the slow economy and the competitive impact of the Internet, it's getting more and more difficult for magicians to get personal attention from experienced dealers. People in many parts of the country simply don't have someone they can trust for good advice and assistance in pursuing their hobbies or careers. To address this problem, Williams Magic has decided to expand again, this time in an entirely different direction. They're adding a mobile component to their business. While both the main store in Tucson and the remote location in Vail continue to prosper, they have now purchased a forty-two-foot RV and have built shelving in the interior garage to contain a complete inventory of magic. Their intent is to literally take their magic shop to their customers.

When asked about the wisdom of expanding in the current "dif-



Custom built portable magic shop



Inside the portable magic shop

ficult" economy Emory Sr. says, "There is no doubt Internet shopping is here to stay. It is both our biggest competitor and one of our greatest assets. If we hadn't jumped into the Internet when we did (about thirteen years ago), we may well have found ourselves out of business by now.

"But many of our customers lament that they miss the opportunity to visit a 'real' magic shop. They don't really like searching for magic online, and they miss being able to talk face-to-face with people who know the products and demonstrate in person. By dividing our inventory of some 6,000+ different items between our walk-in locations and the mobile RV we hope to become the 'local' shop for those magicians who don't already have access to a local shop.

"We have no specific plans to close our walk-in shops, and we don't intend to begin traveling full-time, but we do intend to travel. Wherever we go, our magic will go with us. And wherever we are, we can continue to operate our Internet business, whether at home or on the road. This approach allows us to take a full and complete inventory to appropriate conventions and, more important, to clubs and individuals in scattered locations without incurring the exorbitant costs of airfare, shipping, daily hotels, and restaurant food that go along with travel."

Last year Emory Sr. and Nathailia celebrated their 56th wedding anniversary and are looking forward to number 57 in July. That's the real magic! They are both deeply involved in the day-to-day activities in the shop in Tucson and welcome everyone with a free cup of coffee.

For relaxation, Dad enjoys spending time with their ten pet Nigerian Dwarf goats. But don't worry; he assures us they will not be traveling with the goats!

Watch for the new Williams Magic RV to "appear" in your neighborhood. If your club is specifically interested in having them visit, just call and ask. They may schedule a trip just for you! ☆



Inside the RV