

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Harlan Tarbell (1890-1960)

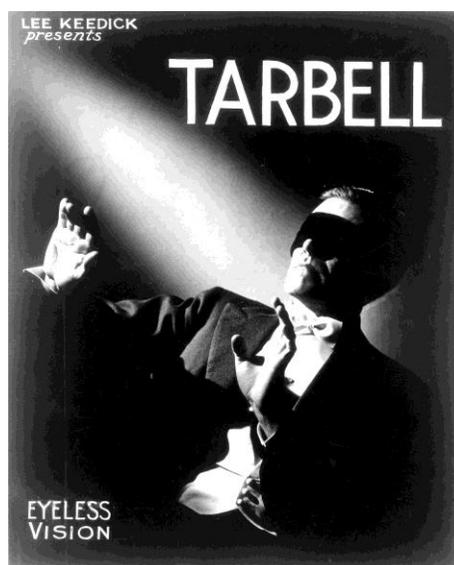
Harlan Tarbell was an internationally acclaimed magician who performed for audiences around the world. He originated over 200 mysteries, including one of the Hindu rope mysteries. Tarbell's specialty was *Eyeless Vision*, also known as *Radar Vision*, which established him as a successful mentalist. Using *Eyeless Vision*, he once drove an automobile through the Loop during Chicago rush hour completely blindfolded.

Harlan Tarbell was born on February 23, 1890 in Delavan, Illinois and grew up in nearby Groveland. As a young boy, Tarbell became interested in magic and presented magic shows to his family and friends. However, he never received formal instruction in his profession. Tarbell moved to Chicago in 1911 to pursue a career in illustration. He was hired by the magic company, Read and Covert, to work on their *Illustrated Catalogue of Superior Magical Apparatus*.

In World War I, Tarbell served as a medic with the 24th Air Company in France. He married Martha Beck in 1920, and they lived at 401 Cottage Hill Avenue in Elmhurst with their children, Harlan Eugene Tarbell, Jr. and Marion.

Tarbell was highly regarded as a magic teacher, and he offered private instruction to aspiring magicians. Some of his most notable students included Orson Welles, Edgar Bergen, and Harry Blackstone. Publishers T. Grant Cooke and Walter Jordan hired Tarbell in the mid-1920s to develop a magic correspondence course. The result was the *Tarbell Course in Magic*, which is one of the most comprehensive and encompassing magic literary works ever produced. The complete course was almost 1,300 pages long and included 60 lessons with over 3,000 illustrations. Originally published as individual illustrated correspondence courses in the 1920s, it was eventually published in book form in 1941.

The course covered every form of magic and went beyond technique, teaching enhanced skills such as patter, marketing, and ethics. It also featured lessons in how to make people laugh, how to attain professionalism, the history of magic, and the importance of good speech. Tarbell began with fundamental drills and practice sessions involving body position, movement, and sleight-of-hand techniques which were incorporated into more complex effects in future lessons. He was lauded for his excellent drawings and clear, concise writing. The Tarbell course was a useful reference book and study aid to magicians of all skill levels, and is considered a standard by magicians to this day.



Advertisement for Harlan Tarbell's
"Eyeless Vision" mystery, M80.26.2

Tarbell lived in Elmhurst until his death in 1960. He and his wife are buried in St. Mary's Cemetery, next to Elmhurst University. His complete works are in the Elmhurst History Museum's collection.

I don't want the audience to think I'm clever; I'd rather have them think I'm as surprised and awed as they are.

--Harlan Tarbell, Chicago Daily Tribune, January 26, 1956

By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, September 2021