



## The Marvel of it All

Jim Alexander

Decades ago, there was the most wonderful place in Trenton: Traver's Book Store. It had started as a furniture store in 1874, soon selling second-hand books as a sideline. By 1926, when it moved to its final location on busy State Street not far from the state Capitol, it had become one of New Jersey's most prominent book stores.

Those were the days when downtown Trenton's business district was active, vibrant, and the center of regional shopping. Residents and visitors could easily walk among fine department stores, theaters, restaurants, hotels, and all manner of specialty shops. For a youngster visiting from out of town, the trek to Traver's was something to be anticipated and savored.

The specially designed building featured a wondrous display of the latest books, carefully curated by the Travers. The building's wide front windows provided bright light for browsing. It was the upstairs that many people remember. That's where the used books were sold: an entire, slightly musty, floor of wonderment available at reasonable prices. Everybody who remembers Traver's recalls that the old wooden floors creaked, especially upstairs -- as this youngster moved along the book shelves, searching for just the right tome to take home.

If you wanted to learn about New Jersey's role in the Civil War, with lists of all its residents who fought, and in many cases died, there was an old book on that,

which I purchased and kept on hand for decades. There were dog-eared atlases, showing strange map projections used by early cartographers, and exciting novels for youngsters by long-forgotten authors like Robert Altsheler. But the one that caught my eye one visit was Richard Halliburton's *Complete Book of Marvels*.

Born to a wealthy Memphis, Tennessee family, Halliburton attended Princeton University. While at the latter, he was struck by wanderlust, and ran off to travel across Europe, and started writing of what he encountered. He returned to complete his degree. Graduating in 1921, he and a friend promptly sailed as common seamen to Germany, and for the next year and a half wandered across Europe, India, and Southeast Asia, finally reaching home again two years later.

He explained: "I wanted freedom, freedom to indulge in whatever caprice struck my fancy, freedom to search in the farthest corners of the earth for the beautiful, the joyous and the romantic." And that's what he did. He crossed the Alps on an elephant like Hannibal had done, visited the Saint Bernards who had saved hikers lost in blizzards or buried in avalanches, climbed Egypt's pyramids, and saw the Great Wall of China. Flew over Africa's Victoria Falls and explored much of what was then called the Dark Continent, often on small planes where none had gone before. He visited the King of Arabia, toured the sites in India, spoke with the Tibetan natives, floated in the Dead Sea, made his way through jungles. At each adventure, he wrote of his impressions and had photos taken.



One that impressed this young reader was his quest to traverse from the Atlantic to the Pacific through the Panama Canal, just as a ship might. Guarded by military sharpshooters who kept the alligators at bay, he swam in the canal for 50 hours over a ten-day period, suffering tropical sunburn and insect bites. With 9,000,000 cubic feet of water being used to lift the S. S. Halliburton through the locks, he paid the standard fee, based on his tonnage, of 36 cents.

His books included *The Royal Road to Romance*, *New Worlds to Conquer*, *The Glorious Adventure*, and *The Flying Carpet*. His work initially coincided with the roaring twenties, the awe of Lindbergh flying solo across the Atlantic, a time when anything seemed possible. He hung out with famous writers and movie stars of the Jazz Age, and climbed to the top of the Golden Gate Bridge, almost always taking photos, many with him featured. With the advent of the Great Depression, his tales presented a welcome way for struggling people to think of happier times. His exploits brought him fame and fortune, but as the Depression wore on, he sensed the need to rekindle interest in his adventures, so he commissioned the building of a Chinese junk to sail from Hong Kong to San Francisco.





The junk departed Hong Kong in March 1939, for what was planned to be a three-month trip. Several weeks later, the *Sea Dragon* hit a monster storm, with gale-force winds and massive waves. Among its last radio messages, sent by the ship's captain but sounding a good deal like Halliburton, were these words: "Having wonderful time, wish you were here instead of me." And then radio contact with the *Sea Dragon* was lost. Neither the junk nor Halliburton was ever found. Later, an old friend confided that Halliburton had once told him that if he ever received a message with the "wonderful time..." wording, that meant that Halliburton was in grave danger.

In 1941, after his presumed death, Halliburton's long-time publisher, Bobbs Merrill, combined two of his most popular books, the *Book of Marvels of the Occident*, and the *Marvels of the Orient* into *Richard Halliburton's Complete Book of Marvels*. The book is an enduring salute to the wonders of nature, the accomplishments of humanity, and the potentials of the human spirit.



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When the aging third generation of Travers could not find a successor to operate their store in a capital city whose vitality had moved to the suburbs, Traver's was closed, and its remaining books sold off.

But it is that second-hand book, with its hundreds of pages of photos of history, travel, and wonderment, that remains on the bookshelf to this day, complete with the Traver's Book Store sticker inside the back cover. In a world confronting many fears and uncertainties, it's a wonderful legacy that Richard Halliburton left for later generations, young and old.