

Saudi Aramco world

July/August 1997
Volume 48, Number 4

Spin Doctor

*Written by Penny Parsekian
Photographed by Paul Horton*

In his youth, Lawrence Sayegh dreamed of performing in vaudeville, but his career took a different spin. He became nine-time world champion and international master trickster of...the yo-yo. He has wowed audiences in 26 countries, most states of the us and on countless film and television screens. Today, at 64, he is still spinning, much to the delight of everyone from kids at birthday parties to executives at corporate events.

"I used to do record pantomime," he says, reflecting on growing up in Central Falls, Rhode Island, in the home of a large, close-knit family of first-generation Arab-Americans. "Today they call it karaoke. I did Al Jolson, Jimmy Durante, Spike Jones.... Muhammad Abdel Wahab, I loved him. He was bigger than Frank Sinatra. Men would swoon listening to him. And Umm Kalthum, she was the nightingale of the Middle East. As a kid, I would play the records over and over again."

Sayegh says he was searching for a sport when he found the yo-yo. "I was too short for basketball, too light for football, too nervous for baseball' he says. But from the beginning, he seemed to have a special knack for the spinning toy on a string. When the Duncan Yo-Yo Company began holding neighborhood competitions in the 1940's, he won every contest within biking distance of his home. He became so good—and so well known—that Duncan eventually barred him from the contests.

His parents, however, were skeptical of their son's peculiar talent.

"They were both born in Damascus," he says. "They had a mom-and-pop grocery store and were very much of the old school: work, work, work; make something of yourself." The yo-yo didn't seem to offer a career path for young Larry. But after he graduated from high school, the president of Duncan Yo-Yo personally contacted Sayegh and offered him a job. The family agreed he should take it.

Duncan sent its new recruit off to demonstrate the company's product in the South and Southwest of the United States, and ultimately in Europe. In 1952, the company showed Sayegh off at a press conference at the Hotel Ritz in Paris. At the time, Sayegh says, the yo-yo was even more popular in Europe—where it had been known since the 17th century—than in the US. There, he demonstrated tricks of his own devising, with such names as "Pistol Pete" and "Overhand Crossfire," both of which involved two yo-yos and multiple crossings of the strings.

He was a hit. *Actualites*, the French news-reel played in movie houses before the feature, filmed Sayegh and his yo-yo tricks in settings all around Paris, and put him onscreen all over the country.

Two years later, Sayegh won his first world championship in another competition sponsored by Duncan. Over the next eight years, until Duncan went out of business and the contest folded with the company, he won every year. In 1958, Ford Motor Company demonstrated its product's unbeatably smooth ride to prospective buyers in Australia by filming Sayegh, yo-yos spinning, atop the roof of a moving car in Tasmania. Today, he can still carry on a conversation while tossing yo-yos with both hands in elaborate configurations—and he can nestle a yo-yo into your shirt pocket from across the room with a flick of his wrist. He may be the only person in the world who can send two yo-yos flying off in different directions while doing the limbo.

When Duncan Yo-Yo went out of business, Sayegh began manufacturing yo-yos of his own patented design. He embeds six weights on each side to give them balanced mass for good momentum, and links the halves with a maple-wood axle. His assembly line, a mesmerizing contraption of bicycle parts, sewing-machine parts and industrial castoffs, allows him to single-handedly turn out one brightly colored plastic yo-yo every 45 seconds. He runs the shop alone, and has produced more than a million yo-yos, all of which he has sold through private shows and television appearances that over the years have included the Mike Douglas Show and the Tonight Show.

These days, the yo-yo is enjoying a resurgence in popularity, and children are showing off their spinning skills in malls from Seattle to Saudi Arabia. Sayegh finds himself living in what he calls the best of both worlds: "Fifty percent in my shop and 50 percent doing shows. This is nice, quiet solitude," he says, surveying his factory domain. "On the other side, it's hectic all over the place."

*Free-lance writer **Penny Parsekian** is author of a forthcoming schoolchildren's guide to the USS Constitution, which is berthed near her home in New London, Connecticut.*

***Paul Horton** is a free-lance photographer based in Middle-town, Connecticut.*