

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Celebrated Texas writer to speak on the Diamond King Medicine Show this Thursday

By Rebecca Norton
Frontier Times Museum

Medicine showman Dr. J. I. Lighthall, aka the Diamond King, died in San Antonio just days after his 30th birthday in 1886. It was believed he contracted smallpox from the crowds at his troupe's performances on Military Plaza. His death in the Alamo City was noted in newspapers from North Dakota to New York to Bristol, England. While the medicines he sold at his shows may not have been any more or less effective than some of the remedies sold by the drugstores of that time, his spellbinding showmanship delivered a powerful placebo effect and lifted folks' spirits.

He was also, apparently, quite a sight to behold. Decades after his death, San Antonio papers recalled his spectacular stage attire, which included an ankle-length sealskin overcoat and large sealskin hat that "sparkled with diamonds arranged in designs of large stars" and a red velvet suit with buttons made of \$10 and \$20 gold pieces. His large sombrero decorated with gold and silver was reportedly a gift from the president of Mexico.

The Frontier Times Museum has partnered with the American Legion Post 157 in bringing author Gene Fowler to Bandera to present an illustrated talk, *THE DIAMOND KING -- Medicine Man of Old San Antone*. The talk will be held at the American Legion Hall at 205 12th St. in Bandera on Oct. 21. This free program starts at 6 p.m. and is part of the museum's ongoing series of cultural programs.

One of the Diamond King's business cards, possibly the only one in existence, is currently on display in the museum and will be on display

during the talk. In a 1953 issue of *Frontier Times* magazine, J. Marvin Hunter marveled that people still remembered how "San Antonio was electrified" by this "strange individual" and his medicine show. "There was personality plus in the eagle eyes and handsome profile of Lighthall," wrote fellow medicine showman Nevada Ned in a 1929 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. "All our kind were prima donnas, and Lighthall most of all."

Fowler is a Texas writer, researcher and performance artist. His work has appeared in *True West*, *Cowboys & Indians*, *Texas Highways*, *Texas Co-op Power*, *San Antonio Express-News*, *Artspace*, *Oxford American*, and many other publications. His books include *Border Radio*, *Crazy Water*, *Mystic Healers and Medicine Shows*, *Mavericks*, and *Metro Music*. He has presented programs at the Institute of Texan Cultures, the Witte Museum, the Briscoe Western Art Museum, the San Antonio Rodeo, the Bullock Texas State History Museum, Contemporary Arts Museum (Houston), White Elephant Saloon (Fort Worth), John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington D.C.), and many other venues. The museum and the American Legion Post 157 are excited to have a writer of his talent and prominence come to Bandera. This free event is being funded through the Coleman Family Fund.