

Mediums, Spirits, and Spooks in the Rocky Mountains: A Brief History of Spiritualism in Colorado 1860-1950.

“Scarcely another cultural phenomenon affected as many people or stimulated as much interest as did Spiritualism in the ten years before the Civil War and, for that matter, throughout the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century.... ‘in 1856, it seemed more likely that Spiritualism would become the religion of America than in 156 that Christianity would become the religion of the Roman Empire, or in 756 that Mohammedanism would be that of the Arabian population.’”¹

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth-century, the country was swept off of its feet by spiritualistic phenomena. Broadly defined, Spiritualism is the belief that the dead survive as spirits and can communicate with the living through the use of mediums or people with a special otherworldly perceptiveness or sensitivity that enables them to detect the presence of and communicate with spirits. Although documented happenings of otherworldly communication and paranormal phenomena have occurred around the world since the beginnings of written history, it was not until the year 1848, with the emergence of organized Spiritualism in the United States, that communication between the living and dead necessitated the assistance of a medium.² The development of this Modern Spiritualism (the version that requires a medium) began in 1848 with the Fox sisters in Hydesville, New York.

After the “Hydesville episode” of 1848, Spiritualism rapidly spread throughout the rest of the United States, starting a very popular trend that appealed to politicians of great import, quintessential authors, the elite of society, and the under classes alike. Although in comparison to other states, Colorado never became a Spiritualistic hub, relative to the state’s total population, Colorado’s Spiritualist community was rather sizable. In fact, between 1860 and 1950, over two hundred articles on Spiritualism appeared in Colorado’s most important newspapers. While not

¹Laurence R Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 4.

²Gordon Stein, *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1996).

as star-studded as the national version, the story of Spiritualism in Colorado is exciting nonetheless. My objective here is not to evaluate the influences or implications of Spiritualism on the social history of the state, but rather to offer a brief account of Colorado's role in this fascinating national phenomenon. However, before examining the presence of Spiritualism in Colorado or even the larger phenomenon of American Spiritualism we must first understand the movements European origins.

Paving the philosophical way for Spiritualism to emerge in the United States were two prominent figures: Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Anton Mesmer. The *Sherlock Holmes* writer, Arthur Conan Doyle, argues that while Emanuel Swedenborg was a successful Swedish scientist, his most lasting impression on history is as actually as a spiritualistic "seer."³ As a young man Swedenborg had visionary moments, or moments of "traveling clairvoyance," where his soul left the body in order to acquire information from the spirit world and then returned to the body with the news of what had transpired. Of his first vision, Swedenborg comments,

The world of spirits, hell and heaven, were convincingly opened to me, where I found many persons of my acquaintance of all conditions. Thereafter, the Lord daily opened the eyes of my spirit to see in perfect wakefulness what was going on in the other world, and to converse, broadawake, with angels and spirits.⁴

Swedenborg continued to have these instances of traveling clairvoyance until his death, each time bringing back more information about the afterworld. Based on the information brought back from his otherworldly travels, Swedenborg dedicated most of his later life to developing a theory about what happens to humans after death. Swedenborg's ideas are still carried on today by a group of people called the Swedenborgians. Spiritualists, however, also adopted some of Swedenborg's ideas, specifically the belief that certain humans are endowed with the power to communicate with the dead and/or are able to supernaturally travel to the afterworld. Although Swedenborgians do not align themselves with Spiritualism in any way, Spiritualists still credit Swedenborg as the first and according to Arthur Conan Doyle the greatest of all spiritualist mediums.

After Swedenborg had laid the ontological foundations in the eighteenth century, the next step in Spiritualism's religious development took place at the turn of the nineteenth century by a Venetian physician named Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). Mesmer postulated the belief

³Arthur Conan Doyle wrote an extensive two volume history on Spiritualism as he himself was a dedicated Spiritualist

⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926) 16.

that all things in the universe are composed of and connected by a magnetic fluid. When things go wrong—for instance, when people become ill—it is a result of an imbalance in this magnetic fluid. Thus, according to Mesmer, treatment for illness relies on the realignment of that individual's magnetism. In order to heal his patients, Mesmer would stroke his hands over the patient's body, thereby inducing a trance-like state in which the patient ceased to feel any pain. Upon exiting the trance the patient would experience a cathartic purging of some or all of their illness. Mesmer discovered that when certain patients entered the trance they also acquired supernatural powers, particularly the power of clairvoyance.

Mesmer's ideas and his supernatural trances gained wide notoriety throughout Western Europe. In a social context where Swedenborg's ideas were already gaining influence, Mesmer's position as a medical doctor only helped to further this growing supernatural fascination by lending medical/scientific credibility to the blossoming phenomenon. The strong presence of Swedenborg's and Mesmer's ideas in the Western world helped to create an ideal environment for the development of Modern Spiritualism to flourish.

The Story of the Fox Sisters

On the night of March 31, 1848, in Hydesville, New York, mysterious rapping sounds were heard in the home of John D. Fox. According to the generally accepted version of the story, John Fox, his wife, and their two youngest daughters, Margaretta (probably age 13) and Katherine (probably age 12), were woken by the sounds. Mrs. Fox, a superstitious woman, quickly jumped to the conclusion that the raps were communications from the spirit world. In order to find out the origin and intention of the spirit, Margaretta and Katherine (Maggie and Kate for short) were able to negotiate a pattern of communication with the knocking sound, where a certain number of raps meant "yes," and another number meant "no." Upon hearing the raps and their ability to communicate, Mrs. Fox summoned the neighbors to confirm the intelligence of the rapping.

Among those summoned was the Fox sisters' older brother, David. David devised a more flexible and accurate system of communication with the spirits, where someone would call out the alphabet and the spirit would rap when the appropriate letter was called, permitting the spirit to spell out entire words and even sentences.⁵ As a sort of legitimacy test, anxious neighbors

⁵ Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1983) 4.

asked the rapping spirit a variety of questions about deceased loved ones. After the spirit answered many of the questions correctly, the neighbors were convinced of the spirit's authenticity and changed the nature of their questions to focus on topics of spirituality; they were especially interested in matters concerning life after death, heaven and hell.

In the presence of family and friends, the creator of the raps identified itself as the spirit of a peddler who had been murdered in and buried under the Fox family home. Weeks later in April, the Foxes discovered fragments of human hair, teeth, and bones buried under their cellar floor.⁶ For many, these findings confirmed the legitimacy of the spirit's claims. News of the raps and the mysterious peddler immediately spread. Soon people from the Hydesville community and surrounding areas crowded the Fox home to hear the rapping spirit for themselves.

In an attempt to offer Maggie and Kate a vacation away from the commotion caused by the rapping spirit, Mrs. Leah Fish, the girl's older sister, invited the younger Fox sisters to her home in Rochester, New York. Surprisingly, miles away from Hydesville, the rapping was heard at Mrs. Fish's home too. The sisters soon discovered that regardless of their location, they were able to communicate with the spirits who dwelled in that area. It was this discovery that helped the girls to realize that *they* were the mechanism for communication. Apparently the spirit world had always been interested in communication with the living, but communication necessitated a medium, or one who possessed a special sensitivity to the spirit messages. With this realization, the rappings soon took on a prophetic tone and "the girls were instructed to announce to the world 'the dawn of a new era' of spirit communication."⁷ Indeed, there was truth in this particular prophecy: the dawning of a new era did emerge. At that moment the Fox sisters probably were not aware of the movement they were helping to initiate.

"Rappomania"

By the end of 1848, all three Fox sisters were professional mediums and the movement was well underway. Although the Fox sisters were suspected of fraud by many and were often the subjects of informal and empirical tests, their popularity increased precipitously for many years. Soon after the Hydesville episode, others began to realize their own supernatural abilities and began to market themselves as professional mediums. Unprecedented numbers of everyday

⁶ Gordon J Melton, *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (Gale Group Inc. Detroit: 2001) 1474.

⁷ Howard Kerr, *Mediums and Spirit-Rappers and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature 1850-1900* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1972).

people gravitated toward Spiritualist mediums for consolation, advice, and spiritual enlightenment. Historians say that by 1851, the country was afflicted with “rappomania.” Spiritualism spread from New York to Washington, through Ohio, and into the west. “In those days,” wrote a journalist nostalgically, “you were invited to Tea and Table Moving as a new excitement.”⁸ American author William Dean Howells “was to remember that in the Ohio town of his youth Spiritualism was ‘rife in every second house in the village, with manifestations by rappings, table-tippings, and oral and written messages from another world.’”⁹ Societies of believers and organizations sprang up, mediums began traveling to give lectures on regular circuits, and in 1855 there was a new book on Spiritualism published every week.

Private sittings for small parties became a fashionable amusement all over the country. The movement flaunted the names of several influential people connected to the practice, including George Templeton Strong, Horace Greeley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Leah Underhill, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Arthur Conan Doyle, and others. So dramatic was the spread of Spiritualism, it is estimated that during the 1850s, one million of the country’s twenty-five million people owed allegiance to the religion. The movement climaxed in the United States during the 1850s and again in the 1870s.

The first national climax can be explained in two ways: 1) the welcoming social context and 2) the oddity of the movement. Spiritualists claimed that theirs was both a science and a religion. The desire to be considered a science is particularly understandable given the zeitgeist of the time. During the 19th century, Americans were particularly infatuated with the scientific innovation as the West was in the midst of the industrial revolution and Spiritualism’s scientific claims only helped to increase its appeal. Particularly since both Swedenborg and Mesmer were both scientists, Spiritualists believed that the scientific credibility of the religion’s originators lent scientific credibility to their practices. R. Laurence Moore elaborates on this point in his book, *In Search of White Crowns: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*, when he says:

Spiritualists drew their language from popular tracts on scientific empiricism. Everything they said and wrote echoed a widespread nineteenth-century secular optimism that stemmed from a faith in evolutionary progress and temperate reform. Spiritualists spread their ideas in unexceptional ways, in the same manner that other ideas were disseminated: books, pamphlets, newspapers, and public lectures.... Professional mediums were really rather skillful in adopting the common forms of public entertainment and religious worship to their own purposes. The homely, down-to-earth spirit messages came mostly from family

⁸ Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972) 29.

⁹ Kerr, 7.

members and patriotic heroes, and they immediately created a feeling of rapport between the sitters and the purported spirit....In many ways spiritualism could claim to be the quintessential expression of the age of the common man.¹⁰

The second reason explaining the initial spread of Spiritualism lies in the entertainment value of the practice. Part of the intrigue was undoubtedly due to the fact that séances were fascinating. Not only were they exciting to participate in but they also made for great story later. Surely, true believers were always present but it is also fair to say that some of the initial appeal was in part a result of the oddity of the phenomena.

The second peak of the movement, during the 1870s, can be attributed to war. Unlike the first phase of the movement, the national zeitgeist was no longer preoccupied by scientific innovation, but rather the ravages of the Civil War. The relationship between the country's opposing sides was still tenuous and many people were still suffering the loss of their loved ones. Massive death left the desperate seeking condolence anywhere that they could find it. In this way, Spiritualism played a major role, maybe even offering a saving grace for those who sought it out.

As the popularity of Spiritualism grew and more people began practicing mediumship, the Fox sisters' alphabetical rapping gave way to more dynamic forms of communication. A popular fad of 1868 was the planchette, a small hand rest attached to a pencil that when touched with the fingers, would supernaturally move in such a way as to spell out Spiritualistic and telepathic messages; the planchette was a predecessor of the Ouija board. The planchette's appeal rested in the fact that it did not require a professional medium for its operation. Ordinary people could receive spirit messages in the privacy of their own homes. Another new Spiritualist development was the materialization of spirits into the flesh. Some mediums became quite famous for their abilities to summon spirits in their full forms. As these new more exciting forms of communication increased, the public demand for the Fox sisters' primitive alphabetical rappings decreased and the Fox sisters began to fade from the limelight.

Moreover, after years of laboring Margaretta and Kate grew wary under the managerial hand of their older sister, Leah, and on October 21, 1888, in front of a press-filled hall Margaretta Fox confessed to being a fraud. Margaretta stated that she and Kate had originally only intended to tease their superstitious mother by cracking their toe-joints against the bedstead,

¹⁰ Moore, XIV.

and that their joke had simply grown out of proportion. Not only did she recreate the rapping sounds with her toes on stage for all to see, but she also confessed that her older sister Leah was responsible for the promulgation of Spiritualism for the purposes of publicity and profit. Maggie said that Leah was aware of her sisters' secret and used it to her personal advantage. With signed agreement from both Margaretta and Katherine Fox, the statement was transcribed and published that same year under the title, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism, Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters*.

Although ironic, the entire episode proved to be surprisingly anticlimactic. On the one hand, long time skeptics seemed to feel that earlier investigation had already proven what the Fox sisters were now confessing, and on the other hand, a good portion of Spiritualists remained faithful despite the confession. So in the end the confession had little effect on the general perception of Spiritualism. In fact, the confession's impact was so slight that before long Margaretta recanted her confession and claimed that she had only "confessed" because she was coerced and bribed by a news hungry media.¹¹ Both girls returned to the séance table and continued to practice as mediums until their deaths. However, they never quite regained the same foothold in society, not necessarily because of the confession, but because their moribund careers had already taken a downward turn. The two younger Fox sisters had been outshone by their older sister, Leah, who to her sister's chagrin, advertised herself as the best and most powerful medium of her day. To add insult to injury, shortly after the confession, Leah disowned Margaretta for her betrayal of their secrets. After a series of personal tragedies, Margaretta died a sickly death in 1883 and one year later Kate died from alcoholism. Despite their tragic end and fraud riddled careers, the Fox sisters (all three of them) are still credited by many believers as the founders of the movement and Hydesville is seen as the birthplace of the religion.¹²

Spiritualism in Colorado

Speaking of the ubiquitous presence of metaphysical practices in late nineteenth century, author Gene Fowler, says that the *Denver Post's* "pages burgeoned with occult promises."¹³ The earliest mentioning's of Spiritualism in Denver newspapers date from 1862. Although it is unclear as to how Spiritualism made its way to Colorado, one would assume that it came along

¹¹ Kerr, 116-120.

¹² Kerr, 8.

¹³ Gene Fowler, *Timber Line: A Story of Bonfils and Tammen*. (New York: Garden City Publishing, 1947) 219.

with some of the early state pioneers as the state was founded just one year earlier, in 1861. Although relatively few articles in Denver newspapers featured Spiritualism during the 1860s, the few articles that did exist highlighted one prominent figure, Mrs. Gordon.

Little is known about Mrs. Gordon outside of the fact that she was a dedicated Spiritualist who often gave lectures or starred in her own plays about Spiritualism. She probably lived in Denver, for many of her plays and lectures took place at the Denver Theater. Although criticized at times for her zealousness, the newspapers credit her as being well spoken, promising actress, whose lectures were usually well attended. From these early disparate sources one could assume that Spiritualism was not a tabooed practice. However, it is uncertain as to whether Mrs. Gordon was actually a medium. It appears as though she was only a believer, and her lectures and plays were dedicated to the proselytization of Spiritualistic principles. Another lesser-known woman, Mrs. Briggs, was also a Spiritualist lecturer who traveled from place to place in Golden. Both women's lectures focused on the universal qualities of Spiritualism such as kindness and unity. Another part of Spiritualism's appeal to large audiences was its inclusiveness; Spiritualists believe that their practices did not have to come at the expense of other religious beliefs. In fact, several mediums continued to follow their other religious traditions while also participating in Spiritualistic practices. Thus, the estimable ideals that Mrs. Gordon and Mrs. Briggs lectured on were probably not presented or received as contradictory or challenging to the existent social mores and values of the time. While Mrs. Gordon and Mrs. Briggs's were probably not channeling spirits in public or making claims about the scientific validity of the practice, the warm welcome they received in Denver was congruent with the welcoming of Spiritualism by national audiences.

Although, the final years of the 1860s were quiet in Colorado, as far as rapping spirits were concerned, the next decades of the state's history was rife with mediums and séances. The 1870s saw the emergence of Spiritualist conventions, the formation of Spiritualist societies in Golden and Boulder, and spirit materializations, all of which made exciting headline news. One interesting episode during the 1870s was the visit of the famed Davenport Brothers. The *Rocky Mountain News* advertised the coming of the "wondrous" Davenport Brothers in a May 1872 issue of the paper. The Davenport Brothers were nationally known for their innovative spirit cabinets, which were large rectangular three walled box structures with a curtain hanging in the place of the fourth wall. A medium would enter the box with their hand tied, the curtain was

pulled to hang in the place of the fourth wall, and then various phenomena, such as the playing of music and flying objects, commenced outside of the box. Similar cabinets are common additives to contemporary magic shows. For many the commotion outside of the box was a testament to the Mediums supernatural abilities. The Davenport Brother's fame drew in a large audience for their Denver performance, and the show was a great success.

The most interesting piece of their visit, however, came a few days later when their agent, Mr. Charles Lloyd, attempted to expose the fraudulence of the brothers. Mr. Lloyd held two shows in which he attempted to expose what he called "the clever tricks of those Gentlemen." In an effort to taint the brother's reputation, Lloyd attempted to recreate several of the Davenports' tricks. The first performance was a small private séance attended by some of Denver's more prominent persons, and it was a great success. Lloyd was able to show how the spirit cabinets and other tricks worked to deceive audiences. The second performance was intended to be much larger and was hosted in a large public gathering hall. Since the Davenports were so popular one might have assumed that a show dedicated to their defrauding would have been equally popular and thus well attended. Interestingly, as we saw with the anticlimactic case of the Fox sisters, there seemed to be little interest in the public defrauding of well-known spiritualists. Consequently, Lloyd's second performance was poorly attended. Not only was it poorly attended but the performance was also fraught with disaster. Poor Mr. Lloyd was only able to accomplish a small portion of his attempted feats with any satisfaction, rigged mechanisms did not start at their appropriate times and several props caught on fire. The performance was an utter disaster! Fortunately, for him, Lloyd's failures were accepted with good humor and the newspaper article offered a light hearted retailing of the events.

The most telling piece of Lloyd's disaster was that it did little in the way of deterring Denverites from flocking to the séance table. The accusation and even the admission of fraud by many of these early practitioners (the Fox sisters and Davenport Brothers are just a few among many) made little impact on the convictions of earnest believers and/or the curiosities of entertainment seekers. In her book, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Ruth Brandon claims that "once they [audiences] have decided that something is caused by a miracle, or by the supernatural, people are generally reluctant to relinquish this explanation in favor of something more humdrum...But it is more

than mere reluctance; it is a positive desire to believe that the magical thing has happened.”¹⁴ One might gently argue that part of Spiritualism’s appeal lied in the fact that people liked and even today still like the idea of being bamboozled. The hallmark of a good magic show by today’s standards is determined by whether the audience is successfully duped or not. Audiences invariably go to magic shows in order to test their own gullibility. At least in this early period, Denverites held something in common with Denverites of today in their desire to believe in the magical, mysterious, and paranormal.

The *Rocky Mountain News* continued to advertise and describe séances by well-known mediums during the 1870s. The most prominent Denver medium was Mr. Peck. Born and raised in Portsmouth, Ohio, a brick mason by trade, Peck began his work as a full time medium in 1870. His séances were hosted in his home located in downtown Denver on Stout Street, and were usually well attended. Peck was able to charge ten dollars per patron, an enormous sum of money for the day and until that point an unheard of amount ever paid for any medium. Peck’s exorbitant admission prices were reflective of the widespread popularity and demand for mediums in late 19th century Colorado.

Aside from his ten dollar admission fee, the most interesting element of Peck’s and other Colorado mediums’ séances was the involvement of Indian spirit guides. By the 1870s, the usage of spirit guides was common among mediums across the country. Guides were designated spirits that directly received a message from the medium and then either transported the message back and forth to the spirits, or the guide would retrieve the desired spirit so that the medium could hold direct conversation. Mediums could often embody their spirit guides (embodiment is when the medium allowed the spirit to control his body). Peck not only embodied his spirit guide but also allowed the spirit to engage in trance-speaking (which is when a spirit audibly delivers a message by controlling the voice of the medium). Each medium usually had a single spirit guide with whom they were always in conference. With a much greater frequency than other parts of the country, the spirit guides of Colorado mediums were often Native Americans.

Sadly, the ancestral particulars of the Native American spirit guides were hardly ever mentioned. Most Native American guides were refereed to generically as Indian; no attention was given to tribal affiliation or other cultural specificities. The language that these guides spoke, if not in broken English, was extemporaneously contrived speech, again usually referred to

¹⁴ Brandon, 241.

generically as Indian language. There were no consistencies in dialect from one spirit guide to another, unless assigned to the same medium. These are just two of the many examples of Spiritualist's cultural carelessness.

Although the Indian spirit guides were used more frequently in Colorado than in other states, the influences of Native American religious traditions on Spiritualism in a broader sense are far reaching. The conjuring of a Native American presence in Spiritualistic circles is also recognizant of the then-current romantic fascination with *foreign* cultures that may have seemed mysterious or even enchanted at times. Author of *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism*, Barbara Weisberg, explains this attitude:

Like the spirit world, these alluring "other worlds" [of the *exotic* Native American or other non-European American culture] seemed to invite investigation, at least insofar as they represent the remote in time, physical distance, or culture. Romanticized views, however, generally bore only an inverse relationship to the actual treatment of minority groups in the culture. As the Native American population disappeared under the brutal onslaught of white settlers...Native American spirits became equally popular attractions in visions and séances. Deemed wise representatives of a simpler, more natural way of life, Native Americans evidently appeared less threatening in immortal than in mortal guise.¹⁵

Phillip Deloria elaborates on the American fascination with "playing Indian" by arguing that for many it was a means of justifying or validating their actions as authentic. In his book *Playing Indian*, he argues that pretending to be Indian and/or appropriating "Indian-ness" has played a central role in the American psyche since the American revolution. In the broadest sense, Deloria asserts that playing Indian has to do with American negotiations of identity and our desires for self-definition. However, playing Indian specifically relates to Spiritualism because of its authenticating affect. Deloria points out that play is powerful, play makes meanings of our actions, and it helps to make imaginings real. "The donning of Indian clothes moved ideas from brains to bodies, from the realm of abstraction to the physical world of concrete experiences... [Indian] identity was not so much imagined as it was performed, materialized through one's body and through the witness and recognition of others."¹⁶ Although Spiritualists did not dress as Indians, the haphazard incorporation of Indians and Indian-ness into séances is emblematic of the pervasive stereotype that Indians are in some way a more spiritual people than the rest. In other words, by having little concern for the diversity and complexities of Native American

¹⁵ Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) 147.

¹⁶ Phillip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 184.

cultures, Spiritualism was able to appropriate a romanticized version of Native American religious traditions into their own rituals as a way of authenticating their process.

On a more general note, in addition to Peck and his Native American spirit guides, the 1870s was a time when Colorado was haunted by the full body materialization of spirits. A materialized spirit is exactly what it sounds to be, a spirit that manifests itself physically for all to see and occasionally touch, too. Between the years of 1874 and 1880, the *Rocky Mountain News* was laden with descriptions of materializing spirits, the séances they appeared in, and the mediums who summoned them. Enjoying statewide notoriety, Mr. and Mrs. Vail of Pueblo were well-known for their abilities to materialize “spooks.” Unfortunately, the Vails enjoyed short lived fame. In February of 1875 they were accused and convicted of fraudulent behavior. They were asked to give a public performance that was to be scrutinized and monitored by a committee of skeptical businessmen, policy makers, and the like. The Vails agreed to the public performance and announced that they would return pre-collected admission fees if the séance proved to be fraudulent. At the last minute, Mrs. Vail claimed to be too sick to perform, the entire thing was called off, and the Vails skipped town without returning any money. The Vails actions caused a public outcry. People were unhappy and quick to charge the mediums and the faith with fraud. Although it was the Vails personal actions as opposed to the actual Spiritualist faith that ended up being the subject of criticism, the public response to the Vail scandal reflected the increasing levels of cynicism towards Spiritualism during the later 1870s. Unlike with the Davenport Brothers in the 1860s, widespread skepticism of Spiritualists was far more pervasive throughout the state during the 1870s, and Coloradoan’s were less likely to excuse fraud with good humor. Increasing levels of Colorado skepticism corresponded with the national decline of Spiritualism, as this was shortly after the second peaking of the movement.

Although scandal was increasing, Colorado Spiritualism was not over yet, during the 1880s there were still significant numbers of skeptical articles, but there were also many supportive and innovative articles dedicated to Colorado Spiritualists. The newspapers featured exciting articles which discussed the emergence of spirit photography (photographs of materialized spirits), Spiritualist camps, advertisements and descriptions of shows given by nationally known mediums who visited the city. In Colorado the most popular medium of this period was Dr. Henry Slade. Slade was well known for his ability to conjure messages from the spirit world via slate writing. Slate writing is the writing of words (usually in a variety of

languages) done with chalk and slate by unseen hands. Dr. Slade's name first appeared in a March 4, 1880 article of the *Rocky Mountain News*, where a reporter offered personal testimony to the magnificence and mystery of Slade's manifestation. The reporter claims that he was able to examine every aspect of the medium's presentation, including table, slates, and chalk; he found no evidence of "irregularity or tampering," meaning that the slates were clear of all writing before the séance began. Slade's spectacular performances were very well attended and before long Slade was known as the "Great Slate Writer." As far as the newspapers report, Dr. Slade was never convicted of scandal and he probably continued to enjoy a comfortable career as a successful medium.

The change in Colorado's public attitude towards Spiritualism occurred after 1915, when Spiritualists began receiving more bad press than ever before. Fanciful stories about spectacular phenomena were almost completely replaced with stories about swindling mediums. Coloradoans began to ardently voice their increasing distaste not only for counterfeit mediums but also for anyone outside of an organized religion who offered spiritual or supernatural services in exchange for money. Gypsies and fortune tellers, along with mediums, were ardently protested against. Additionally, the development of Spiritualism is hard to track after 1915 because popular opinion seems to have conflated it with anyone or any practices associated with the paranormal. Newspaper articles after this point use the words medium, gypsy and fortuneteller interchangeably. Coloradoans also began to seek legal repercussions for deceitful behavior. Clairvoyants were chased out of town, arrested, and/or fined if persecuted. This intolerant behavior increased precipitously and climaxed directly after World War II.

Like the situation after the Civil War, directly after World War II, many who had lost loved ones sought condolence wherever possible, including through the assistance of mediums and fortunetellers. However the two post-war situations ended up not being the same. While people felt consoled after the Civil War, after WWII people felt that their vulnerability was taken advantage of. Stories of patrons who felt that they had been deceived filled the papers and many persons sought legal protection from and/or reprimand for all mediums and fortunetellers. Although there were minor legal consequences (fines and/or short stints in jail) for being guilty of fraud, there were no specific laws prohibiting practices dealing with the supernatural. So in 1946 Denverites rallied to change the law by proposing what was called the Marranzino Bill, an amendment which would make all paranormal activities within the Denver city limits illegal. The

papers were filled with the ranting of angry citizens promoting the banishment of Spiritualists. The papers included article with headlines like “Denver’s Witches of Endor,” “Spiritualist Quacks in Denver,” “Non-Existent Brother is ‘Found’ at Séance,” and “Not Religion, but Racket!” Despite the amount of angry backlash that Spiritualists received in the news it ended up not being enough to convince the city council to pass the Marranzino bill and paranormal activities within the city limits are still legal to this day. Although, the attempts to make Spiritualism illegal failed, the strong public backlash that the movement experienced helped to lead to the social death of the movement.

The End of a Movement

After 1950, Spiritualism almost completely faded from the limelight. There are few mentions of Spiritualism in Colorado after this point. Psychics, on the other hand, increasingly gained notoriety. Although psychics and Spiritualists share a similar dependence on clairvoyance for their respective practices, their arts are very different indeed. One key difference is that Spiritualism concentrates on communicating with the deceased, psychics do no limit themselves to the past; in fact they often delve into the future. Spiritualists today do not associate themselves with psychics and vice-versa.

This short account has attempted to sketch the ways in which Spiritualism in Colorado followed the flow of the national pattern while also illustrating the areas that Colorado’s story was exceptional. Although nationally Spiritualism is no longer a prominent social phenomenon, there are still Spiritualistic practitioners around the world, particularly concentrated in Great Britain, with a few remaining in the United States. Today there is one known Spiritualist church in Colorado, the Chapel of Spiritual Awareness, which is located in Littleton. At this point, the prospects of Spiritualism in Colorado are unknown. Spiritualism may reemerge in Colorado yet. However, since this study concerned itself with spiritualistic hauntings of history, it will leave the telling of the future to others that are more gifted in those mysterious arts.

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