



Undercover Among the Spirits: Investigating Camp Chesterfield

Camp Chesterfield is a notorious spiritualist enclave of Chesterfield, Indiana. Dubbed “the Coney Island of spiritualism,” it has been the target of many exposés, notably a book by a confessed fraudulent medium published in 1976. A quarter century later I decided to see if the old deceptions were still being practiced at the camp; naturally my visit was both unannounced and undercover.

The Background

Modern spiritualism began in 1848 with the schoolgirl pranks of Maggie and Katie Fox at Hydesville, New York. Although four decades later the sisters confessed that their “spirit” rappings had been bogus, in the meantime the craze of allegedly communicating with the dead had spread across America, Europe, and beyond. At séances held in darkened rooms and theaters, “mediums” (those who supposedly contacted spirits for others) produced such phenomena as slate writing, table tipping, and “materializations” of spirit entities.

As adherents grew in number, spiritualist camp meetings began to be common, and some groups established permanent spiritualist centers.

Perhaps none developed such an unsavory reputation as Camp Chest-

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erfield, which opened in 1891. Even today, spiritualist friends of mine roll their eyes accusatorially whenever Chesterfield's name is mentioned, and they are quick to point out that the camp is not chartered by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. The introduction to an official history of Chesterfield (*Chesterfield Lives* 1986, 6), admits it is surprising the camp has survived, given its troubled past:

In fact, in its 100 years of recorded history, Camp Chesterfield has been “killed off” more than once! There have been cries of “fraud” and “fake” (and these were some of the nicer things we have been called!) and of course, the “exposés” came along with the regularity of a well-planned schedule. Oh yes! We have been damned and downed—but the fact remains that we must have been doing something right because: CHESTERFIELD LIVES!!

Be that as it may, the part about the exposés is certainly true.

A major exposé came in 1960 when two researchers—both sympathetic to spiritualism—arranged to film the supposed materialization of spirits. This was to occur under the mediumship of Edith Stillwell, who was noted for her multiple-figure spirit manifestations, and the séance was to be documented using see-in-the-dark technology. While the camera ran, luminous spectral figures took form and vanished near the medium's cabinet, but when the infrared film was

processed the researchers saw that the ghosts were actually confederates dressed in luminous gauze, some of whom were recognizable as Chesterfield residents. They had not materialized and dematerialized but rather came and went through a secret door that led to an adjacent apartment (Keene 1976, 40; Christopher 1970, 174). One of the researchers, himself a devout spiritualist, was devastated by the evidence and railed against “the frauds, fakes and fantasies of the Chesterfield Spiritualist camp!” (O'Neill 1960)

An even more devastating exposé came in 1976 with the book *The Psychic Mafia* written by former Chesterfield medium M. Lamar Keene. Saying that money was “the name of the game” at Chesterfield, Keene detailed the many tricks used by mediums there which he dubbed “the Coney Island of Spiritualism.” He told how “apports” (said to be materialized gifts from spirits) were purchased and hidden in readiness for the séance; how chiffon became “ectoplasm” (an imagined mediumistic substance); how sitters' questions written on slips of paper called billets were secretly read and then answered; how trumpets were made to float in the air with discarnate voices speaking through them; and how other tricks were accomplished to bilk credulous sitters (Keene 1976, 95–114).

Keene also told how the billets were shrewdly retained from the various

public clairvoyant message services held at Chesterfield. Kept in voluminous files beneath the Cathedral, the billets—along with a medium's own private files and those shared by fellow scam artists—provided excellent resources for future readings.

There were other exposés of Camp Chesterfield. In 1985 a medium from there was making visits to Lexington, Kentucky, where he conducted dark-room materialization séances. He featured the production of apports, the floating-trumpet-with-spirit-voices feat, and something called “spirit precipitations on silk.” To produce the latter, the sitters’ “spirit guides” supposedly took ink from an open bottle and created their own small self-portraits on swatches of cloth the sitters held in their laps. I investigated when one sitter complained, suspecting fraud. Laboratory analyses by forensic analyst John F. Fischer revealed the presence of solvent stains (shown under argon laser light). A recipe for such productions given by Keene (1976, 110–111)—utilizing a solvent to transfer pictures from newspapers or magazines—enabled me to create similar “precipitations” (Nickell with Fischer 1988). The prepared swatches had obviously been switched for the blank ones originally shown.

Undercover

I had long wanted to visit Camp Chesterfield, and in the summer of 2001, following a trip to Kentucky to see my elderly mother and other family members, I decided to head north to Indiana to check out the notorious site.

Now, skeptics have never been welcome at Chesterfield. The late Mable Riffle, a medium who ran the camp from 1909 until her death in 1961 (*Chesterfield Lives* 1986) dealt with them summarily. When she heard one couple using the f-word—*fraud*—she snarled, reports Keene (1976, 48), “We do not have that kind of talk here. Now you get your goddam ass off these hallowed grounds and don’t ever come back!”

Another skeptic, a reporter named

Rosie who had written a series of exposés and was banned from the grounds, had the nerve to return. Wearing a “fright wig,” she got into one of Riffle’s séances and when the “spirits” began talking



through the trumpet the reporter began to demean them. According to Keene (1976, 48–49), Riffle recognized Rosie’s voice immediately and went for her. “Grabbing the reporter by the back of the neck, she ushered her up a steep flight of stairs, kicking her in the rump on each step and cursing her with every profanity imaginable.”

With these lessons in mind, I naturally did not want to be recognized at Chesterfield—not out of fear for my personal safety but so as to be able to observe unimpeded for as long as possible. When in my younger years I was a private investigator with an international detective agency, I generally used my own name and appearance and, for undercover jobs, I merely wore the attire that was appropriate for a forklift driver, steelworker, tavern waiter, or other “role” (Nickell 2001).

The same is true for several previous undercover visits to paranormal sites and gatherings (including a private spiritualistic circle which included table-tipping and other séances that I infiltrated in 2000). Since I am often the token skeptic on television talk shows and documentaries on the paranormal, I have naturally feared I might be recognized, but I rarely made any effort to disguise myself and usually had no problem.

However, for my stint at Camp Chesterfield, I felt special measures were called for so I decided to alter my appearance, shaving off my mustache (for the

first time in over thirty years!), and replacing my coat-and-tie look with a T-shirt, suspenders, straw hat, and cane. I also adopted a pseudonym, “James Collins,” after the name of one of Houdini’s assistants. From July 19 to 23, “Jim,” who seemed bereft at what he said was the recent death of his mother, limped up and down the grounds and spent nights at one of the camp’s two hotels (devoid of such amenities as TV and air conditioning). The results were eye-opening, involving a panoply of discredited spiritualist practices that seemed little changed from when they were revealed in *The Psychic Mafia*.

Billet Reading

I witnessed three versions of the old billet scam: one done across the table from me during a private reading, and two performed for church audiences, one of them accomplished with the medium blindfolded.

The first situation—with the medium working one-on-one with the client—involves getting a peek at the folded slip while the person is distracted. (Magicians call this *misdirection*.) For instance, while the medium directs the sitter’s attention, say by pointing to some numerological scribbles (as were offered in my case), she can surreptitiously open the billet in her lap with a flick of the thumb of her other hand and quickly glimpse the contents. As expected, the alleged clairvoyant knew exactly what was penned on my slip—the names of four persons who had “passed into spirit” and two questions—but did not know that the people were fictitious.

One aspect of the reading, which was held in the séance room of her cottage, was particularly amusing. At times she would turn to her right—as if acknowledging the presence of an invisible entity—and say “Yes I will.” This was a seeming acknowledgment of some message she supposedly received from a spirit, which she was to impart to me. I paid the medium thirty dollars cash and

considered it a bargain—although not in the way the spiritualist would no doubt have hoped.

At both of the billet readings I attended that were conducted for audiences (one in a chapel, the other in the cathedral), a volunteer stood inside the doorway and handed each of us a slip of paper. Printed instructions at the top directed us to “Please address your billet to one or more loved ones in spirit, giving first and last names. Ask one or more questions and sign your full name.”

On the first occasion I made a point of seeming uncertain about how to fold the paper and was told that it was to be simply doubled over and creased; if it was done otherwise, I was told strictly, the medium would not read it. I did not ask why, since I tried to seem as credulous as possible, but in fact I knew that there were two reasons. First, of course, the billets needed to be easy to open with a flick of the thumb, and second, it was essential that they all look alike. The reason for the latter condition lay in the method employed: After the slips were gathered in a collection plate and dumped atop the lectern (where they could not be seen from our vantage point) the medium would pick one up and hold it to his or her forehead while divining its contents. The trick involves secretly glancing down at an open billet. A sitter who had closed his slip in a distinctive way (such as by pleating it or folding it into a triangle) might notice that the billet being shown was not the one apparently being viewed clairvoyantly.

The insistence on how the paper must be folded indicated trickery. And that was confirmed for me at one session through my writing the names of non-existent loved ones and signing with my pseudonym. From near the back of the chapel I acknowledged the medium’s announcement that he was “getting the Collins family.” After revealing the bogus names I had written, he gave me an endearing message from my supposedly departed mother that answered a question I had addressed to her on the billet. However, my mother was actually among the living and, of course, not named Collins.

The other public billet reading I attended was part of a Gala Service held in the Cathedral. The medium placed

adhesive strips over her eyes followed by a scarf tied in blindfold fashion. This is obviously supposed to prove that the previously described method of billet reading was not employed, but according to Keene (1976, 45), who performed the same feat, “The secret here was the old mentalist standby: the peek down the side of the nose.” He adds: “No matter how securely the eyes are blindfolded, it’s always possible to get enough of a gap to read material held close to the body.” Unfortunately, at this reading my billet was not among those chosen, so there were no special communications from the non-existent persons whose names I had penned.

Spirit Writing

Another feat practiced by at least three mediums at Chesterfield is called “spirit card writing.” This descends from the old slate effects that were common during the heyday of spiritualism, whereby (in a typical effect) alleged otherworldly writing mysteriously appeared on the inner surfaces of a pair of slates that were bound together (Nickell 2000). In the modern form (which exists in several variants), blank cards are placed in a basket along with an assortment of pens, colored pencils, etc. After a suitable invocation, each of the cards is seen typically to bear a sitter’s name surrounded by the names of his “spirit guides” or other entities and possibly a drawing or other artwork. The sitter keeps the card as a tangible “proof” of spirit power.

At Chesterfield one afternoon I attempted to sign up for a private card-writing séance later that evening at the home of a prominent medium (who also advertises other feats including “pictures on silk”). When that session proved to be filled, I decided to try to “crash” the event and soon hit on a subterfuge. I placed the autograph of “Jim Collins” on the sign-in sheet for the *following* week, then showed up at the appointed time for the current séance a few hours later. I milled about with the prospective sitters, and then we were all ushered into the séance room in the medium’s bungalow.

So far so good. Unfortunately when he read off the signees’ names and I was unaccounted for, I had some explaining

to do. I insisted I had signed the sheet and let him discover the “error” I had made. Then, suitably repentant and deeply disappointed, I implored him to allow me to stay, noting that there was more than one extra seat. Of course, if the affair were bogus, and the cards prepared in advance, I could not be permitted to participate. Not surprisingly I was not, being given the lame excuse (by another medium, a young woman, who was sitting in on the session) that the medium needed to prepare for the séance by “meditating” on each sitter’s name. (I wondered which of the two types of mediums she was: one of the “shut-eyes,” simple believers who fancy that they receive psychic impressions, or one of the “open mediums,” who acknowledge their deceptions within the secret fraternity [Keene 1976, 23].) Even without my admission fee, I estimate the medium grossed approximately \$450.

The next day I sought out one of the sitters who consoled me over my not having been accepted for the séance. She showed me her card which bore a scattering of names like “Gray Wolf” in various colors of felt-pen handprinting—all appearing to me on brief inspection to have been done by one person. The other side of the card bore a picture (somewhat resembling a Japanese art print) that she thought had also been produced by spirits, although I do not know exactly what was claimed by the medium. I did examine the picture with the small lens on my Swiss army knife which revealed the telltale pattern of dots from the halftone printing process. The woman seemed momentarily discomfited when I showed her this and indeed acknowledged that the whole thing seemed hard to believe, but she stated that she simply *chose* to believe. I nodded understandingly; I was not there to argue with her.

“Direct Voice”

My most memorable—and unbelievable—experience at Camp Chesterfield involved a spirit materialization séance I attended at a medium’s cottage on a Sunday morning. Such offerings are not scheduled in the camp’s guidebook but are rather advertised via a sign-in book,

and, perhaps an accompanying poster, on the medium's porch. As my previous experience showed, it behooved one to keep abreast of the various offerings around the village. So I was out early in the morning, hobbling with my cane up and down the narrow lanes. Soon, a small poster caught my eye: "Healing Séance with Apports." It being just after 6:00 A.M., and the streets silent, I quietly stepped onto the porch and signed up for the 10:00 A.M. session.

At the appointed time seven of us had gathered and the silver-haired medium ushered us into the séance room which she promptly secured against light leakage, placing a rolled-up throw rug at the bottom of the outer door and another rolled cloth to seal the top, and closing a curtain across an interior door. She collected twenty-five dollars from each attendee and then, after a brief prayer, launched into the healing service. This consisted of a "pep talk" (as she termed it) followed by a brief session with each participant in which she clasped the person's hands and imparted supposed healing energies.

It eventually came time for the séance. A pair of tin spirit trumpets standing on the floor by the medium's desk suggested we might experience "direct voice," by which spirits supposedly speak, the trumpets often being used to amplify the vocalizations. The medium began by turning off the lamps and informing us that "dark is light." Soon, in the utter blackness, the voices came, seeming to be speaking in turn through one of the trumpets. Keene (1976, 104–108) details various means of producing "levitating" trumpets, complete with luminescent bands around them "so that the sitters could see them whirling around the room, hovering in space, or sometimes swinging back and forth in rhythm with a hymn." But here, however, we were left to our imaginations. Mine suggested to me that the medium was not even bothering to use the large trumpet, which might prove tiresome, but may have been utilizing a small tin megaphone—another trick described by Keene.

Some mediums were better at pretending direct voice than others; some-

times, according to one critic, "All the spirit voices sounded exactly like the medium . . ." (Keene 1976, 122). Such was the case at my séance. The first voice sounded just like the medium using exaggerated enunciation to simulate an "Ascended Master" (who urged the rejection of negativity); another sounded just like the medium adopting the craggy voice of "Black Elk" (with a message about having respect for the Earth); and still another sounded just like the medium using a perky little-girl voice to conjure up "Miss Poppy" (supposedly one of the medium's "joy guides").

At the end of the séance, after the lights were turned back on, one of the trumpets was lying on its side on the floor, as if dropped there by the spirits—or, as I thought, simply tipped over by the medium. Finally, we were invited up to get our "apports."

Apports

Supposedly materialized or teleported gifts from the spirits, apports appear at some séances under varying conditions—sometimes tumbling out of a spirit trumpet, for example. Keene (1976, 108) says those at Camp Chesterfield were typically "worthless trinkets" such as broaches or rings often "bought cheap in bulk." One medium specialized in "spirit jewels" (colored glass) while another apported arrowheads; special customers might receive something "more impressive." Camp Chesterfield instructed its apport mediums to ". . . please ask your guides to bring articles of equal worth to each sitter and not to bring only one of such articles as are usually in pairs (earrings or cufflinks, for instance)" (quoted from "The Medium's Handbook" by Keene 1976, 63).

At our séance the apports were specimens of hematite which (like many other stones) has a long tradition of alleged healing and other powers (Kunz 1913). The shiny, steel-gray mineral had obviously been tumbled (mechanically polished), as indicated by surface characteristics shown by stereomicroscopic examination, and was indistinguishable from specimens purchased in shops that sell such New Age talismans.

The medium handed each of us one of the seven stones after picking it up with a tissue and noting with delight our reaction at discovering it was icy cold! This was a nice touch, I thought, imparting an element of unusualness as if somehow consistent with having been materialized from the Great Beyond—although probably only kept by the medium in her freezer until just before the séance when it was likely transferred to a thermos jar. We were told that each apport was attuned to that sitter's own energy "vibrations" and that no one else should ever be permitted to touch it. If someone did, we were warned, it would become "only a stone."

I left Camp Chesterfield on the morning of my fifth day there, after first taking photographs around the village. As I reflected on my experiences, things seemed to have changed little from the time Keene wrote about in *The Psychic Mafia*. Indeed the deceptions harkened back to the days of Houdini and beyond—actually, all the way back to 1848 when the Fox sisters launched the spiritualist craze with their schoolgirl tricks.

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