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ORDINARY SPIRITS IN AN EXTRAORDINARY TOWN: FINDING IDENTITY IN
PERSONAL IMAGES AND RESURRECTED MEMORIES IN
LILY DALE, NEW YORK

by

Mary Catherine Gaydos Gabriel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies
(Folklore)

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2010
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ABSTRACT


by

Mary Catherine Gaydos Gabriel, Master of Science
Utah State University, 2010

Major Professor: Dr. Jeannie Banks Thomas
Department: English

Every summer, Lily Dale, New York, a community founded on spiritualist beliefs and steeped in an eccentric explosive past, hosts thousands of visitors seeking to communicate with dead friends and relatives, while the residents lead ordinary lives in the midst of the supernatural hype permeating their town. Their stories are considered by most to be secondary to the illustrious trappings of the community in which they occurred. My research employs oral histories prompted by personal photographs to showcase the residents’ everyday experiences amidst the town’s infamy, illuminating the undervalued individual experience of those living in communities of such extraordinary repute. The attitudes of the residents displayed when sharing their memories is contextualized in the material behavior exhibited historically in the Spiritualist religion, spirit photography, and the formative years of Lily Dale’s growth from a summer camp in the late 1800s to a town of permanent yearlong residents practicing unorthodox beliefs. Through the residents’ sharing of images and memories, they reveal that their “ordinary”
lives include a deep-rooted understanding of the Spiritualist lifestyle by unconsciously weaving spirit encounters and metaphysical events in and out of their conversation without making distinctions that they are in any way unusual. Spirit is not only in the air in Lily Dale—to the residents it is the air.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many trusted friends and mentors, both long-term and more recent, played critical roles in bringing this project to fruition. I am deeply grateful to them all for investing their knowledge, time and energy in my work and in me. The absence of any one of these great folks would diminish this project considerably. These remarkable people are listed below in a loose chronological order in which this project unfolded.

Tom Barkman: my first photography instructor and subsequent friend who helped me appreciate the secret stories held by a photographic image.

Kevin Martini-Fuller: photography instructor and dear friend, and endless source of inspiration; thank you for getting me to Elko where I discovered folklore.

Sally Haueter: my first folklorist friend who explained to me, on that initial Elko trip, what folklore actually is.

Jeannie Thomas: major professor, mentor, and friend who “gets” me, introduced me to Lily Dale, and gently and astutely helped me shape this thesis into its current version.

Lisa Gabbert: professor, mentor, and friend who freely shares her ready smile, twinkling eye, and supporting hand whenever needed.

Steve Siporin: professor, mentor and friend who patiently listened and laughed while I talked incessantly about nothing, egging me on with esoteric connections.

Sita Bell: dear friend and fellow graduate student who provided me with a shoulder, an ear, laughter, and the correct sentence structure whenever asked.

Katie Stout: dear friend and fellow graduate student who spent hours listening to me whine while pouring me wine, and even more hours reading and rereading this thesis, making sure I exhibited a semblance of sense in my writing.

Susan Glasier: Lily Dale Assembly Director who was a staunch ally before, during, and after my research, and without whose help the road would have been much longer.

Lily Dale Residents: contributors and friends who gave generous amounts of time to share images and memories. Thank you for welcoming me into your lives.
Shelley and Frank Takei: Angel House owners and dear friends who ended up being my guardian angels, especially when I showed up on their doorstep wounded; I am forever grateful for the H.P. Room.

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Bonnie Glass-Coffin: committee member, mentor, friend and touchstone through the last two years; thank you for providing light along the way.

Bill Gabriel: husband, best friend, and life-long partner. Thank you for clearing my path to make this possible, and for all your thoughtful kindnesses when I was on the edge, your tireless editing, and the coffee, popcorn, and wine—in that order.

M. K. Gaydos Gabriel
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INTRODUCTION

Lily Dale, a tiny hamlet in upstate New York, was founded in 1879 as a summer camp for an emerging free thinking community that had embraced the spiritualist beliefs sweeping America. The primary tenant of all spiritualism is the belief in the continuity of life after death and the ability to communicate with the spirits of those who have died. Every summer, the camp at Lily Dale provided a gathering place for like-minded freethinkers to immerse themselves in the study, practice, and exchange of philosophical ideas. Within a short decade of its founding, the tent sites in Lily Dale became plots for permanent homes, turning the camp into a town in which many former summer dwellers remained year round. Today the entire population continues to embrace nineteenth-century Spiritualist beliefs, living in peaceful harmony with the always-present spirits of the deceased. Many residents are registered mediums who make their living by invoking spirit for the 22,000 plus visitors who flock to the miniature community every summer during July and August when the town opens as a summer camp in the tradition established over a century ago.

Lily Dale’s history is intertwined with the tumultuous days of the early Spiritualist movement when attempts to prove the existence of spirit were met with relentless efforts to expose fraudulent practices. Inanimate objects became “alive” with spirit, substantiated by furniture drifting across floors and trumpets freely floating about séance rooms through which dead relatives spoke to those in attendance. Ectoplasm seeped from spirit mediums’ bodies and otherworldly spirit images began appearing in photographs. The circus-like nature surrounding the spirit manifestations and the fervent efforts to prove fakery created scandal and infamy in communities throughout America, including Lily
Dale. By the mid-1940s Lily Dale’s governing body banned all physical evidence of spirit perpetrated by medium practitioners within its gates, calming the atmosphere but not erasing what had transpired.

Today Lily Dale is a summer magnet for thousands of curious experimenters, legend trippers, and mourners hoping to witness spirit for a cadre of reasons. These summer visitors and the active Lily Dale mediums are the targets for most research and media activity. In contrast, my interest in Lily Dale lies in the average residents, those with no particular talent for speaking with the dead, and their individual experiences of living and growing up in a town whose reputation eclipses those who live within it. The private photographs of the residents are, in a similar manner, overshadowed by the more tantalizing early spirit photographs as well as modern variations we see today. In my research, I analyze the residents’ unassuming photographs and associated memories against the backdrop of the history and practice of Spiritualism and the supernatural hype surrounding Lily Dale. The casual position of the residents regarding their individual stories suggests the lives of the common residents of Lily Dale have taken a back seat to the notoriety of the town’s history, in spite of their essential role in maintaining, and in some cases strengthening the town’s ability to survive. Participants’ comments and reactions to this research project provide evidence that they benefited from a reawakened individual identity through sharing their images and associated memories, and subsequently and simultaneously strengthened their identity as solid members within the overshadowing community. The revelation of imagery and experiences of the less celebrated residents who exist outside the limelight of the town provides an alternative view and therefore a broader understanding of the community that is known by its
reputation of unearthly phenomenon and “foolish” beliefs in the eyes of many outsiders. In addition, the illumination of the residents’ casual attitude about spirit and the nonchalant way in which they mention it in telling their stories, stands in stark contrast to the way outsiders view spirit, and therefore provides us with a more intimate understanding of what it means to be a Spiritualist living in today’s Lily Dale.

My primary, although not exclusive, method of data collection was to use personal photographs to inspire recollections of Lily Dale’s private citizens, specifically targeting their individual snapshot collections rather than the more abundant historical images on display throughout Lily Dale’s public buildings; the community photographs often lead to boiler plate chronicles of town events and characters rather than the day-to-day minutia that comprises most of our lives. It is the personal experience of the ordinary resident that is the target data for this project. Concentrating on the participants’ uncelebrated images that they have squirreled away in boxes and bins provided a framework in which to stay within the sphere of personal experience as they shared memories. Their narratives were most often about experiences within Lily Dale or in relationship to the town or Spiritualism, and almost always placed the teller as an active participant in the memory. Many of these recollections were truly resurrected as evidenced by more than one comment from contributors about having forgotten about the event until they had viewed the images. Their positive responses support my assessment that identities, both individual and communal, were strengthened from the experience of sharing their unique stories; the realization that they were adding to the fabric of Lily Dale’s history became obvious to them as they agreeably recorded for me what they had previously considered inconsequential. For many, it was the first time they were asked to share personal
anecdotes regarding life in Lily Dale. Their sharing aided my research by dusting away the hype of the more fantastical elements of Spiritualism, Lily Dale, and the better known characters associated with both, to reveal the foundation of a community that fully lives the belief that spirit is common and not extraordinary, a community committed to its founding ideals in the face of ongoing ridicule, misunderstanding, and misplaced sensationalism by outsiders.

A large volume of varied background material is needed to begin to understand Lily Dale, its current residents, and their deep-rooted belief in Spiritualism. To build a framework for this essential backdrop, I present this material chronologically beginning with the development of Spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century including the religious and social influences preceding its rise; the story of Katy and Maggie Fox who are widely credited with the launch of the official religion; Spiritualism’s inextricable connection to the Women’s Movement; and the consequences of popular acceptance of the new religion. Following that, I contextualize Spiritualism’s emergence during the concurrent development of photography and the subsequent results of Spiritualism and photography’s intimate pairing in “spirit photography.” This foundation informs my discussion of early Lily Dale’s founders, the town’s connection to the social movements of the early twentieth century, and the spirit spectacles and parade of investigators and celebrities who came to town to either validate spirit existence or expose fraud.

In presenting this material, I apply theories from photography, memory, and folklore scholars to ground my viewpoint and conclusions. “Material behavior,” a concept first described by Michael Owen Jones (1982:50) and finally named, defined, and applied by Jones over a decade later (1997) plays a prominent role in my analysis of the Fox sisters’
journey, early Spiritualist mediums and photography, all of which are enmeshed within Lily Dale’s history and current atmosphere. Jones describes material behavior as the “activity in producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world” (202) and suggests that it is this behavior that is the most relevant aspect to study when observing communities, providing a much deeper understanding of the individuals and elements of the society than any artifact that remains after the behavior is complete. A simple example of a material behavior in our culture is when a child jumps up and down and claps in delight at the sight of a birthday cake; the cake is the object, but doesn’t tell us anything about human behavior associated with it. The more informative cultural message is the behavior it invokes, that children are excited and react in a positive manner in response to the cake. I will apply Jones’ theory of material behavior to the historical and current Spiritualist practices of invoking physical manifestations of spirit, as well as incorporate his application of the theory to event analysis (1997) as a model.4

Material behavior theory serves as a method of analysis of my field research as well. When applied to examples of the residents’ personal images and subsequent interviews, I offer evidence of how the viewing of a forgotten image and its resurrected memory is an example of material behavior and how that behavior may ultimately play a role in strengthening individual identities previously suppressed by an overpowering community reputation. In further analysis, I discuss instances of strengthened individual identity giving rise to enhanced identity within the group as seen when residents shift the focus of their narration from the personal event being described to incidences or feelings about Lily Dale.
This study leads to an enriched understanding of the underlying character of the Lily Dale community through the sharing of personal images and stories by ordinary individuals. The story details, the manner of delivery of the memories, and even the attitudes toward my request for participation provide several opportunities to demonstrate a more complete portrayal of the town. Residents have a consummate belief that coexistence with and among spirits is a common occurrence rather than a remarkable event. Their narratives provide a means to interpret life in Lily Dale without the slanted misconceptions of outsiders, placing greater emphasis, and therefore a more accurate perspective, on the mundane occurrences that collectively form human personality and community. In their entirety, the narratives demonstrate that the infamous reputation of Lily Dale is just one interpretation of this extraordinary town.

Although this study primarily sought the everyday memories of the less famous people in Lily Dale, stories of ancestral trance mediums and spirit activity pepper the memory narratives shared by all of my contributors, without exception. In spite of many residents’ lack of fame and a self-proclaimed inability to personally conjure spirit for others, every person living in Lily Dale is steeped in spirit experience to the point that it is not possible to have a conversation of any length without some form of spirit popping into the dialog. In fact, residents believe that anyone willing to become aware of their ethereal signals can communicate with those who have passed on. Those living in Lily Dale came to be associated with the town either through Spiritualist ancestors, many of whom were mediums in the earliest days in the summer camp, or they have strong Spiritualist beliefs themselves. Spirit permeates the psyche of every resident, most family trees, and at the very minimum the current culture of the town. Spirit is the overwhelming “elephant in
the room” that must be addressed in this study because I specifically target everyday
events rather than spirit events, yet the contributors regularly share memory fragments
that include spirit while viewing the snapshots. This incorporation of the foundational
belief of Spiritualism (the continuity of life beyond death) into daily experience
transforms spirit into just another “mundane” event that takes place as a part of each day.
It is not possible to separate a Lily Dale resident from Spiritualism or its history, and
therefore it is imperative that Spiritualism and the concurrent movements and practices
that interacted with its development, rise, and demise are fully appreciated in order to
better understand the resident’s narrative in the context in which they share them.
Without this context the residents’ memories will appear to be more sensational to an
outsider than they are considered to be by the person who experienced the event, and
therefore not a regular, common experience. To prevent this misinterpretation, the
following sections discussing Spiritualism, the women’s movement, and photography
build a complex yet compelling structure within which to frame a fuller understanding of
the later narrative discussions.
SPIRITUALISM

Religious and Social Precursors

Modern Spiritualism is a uniquely American religion that exploded in the late 1840s, peaking during the personal and social dark periods of the American Civil War and World War I. It is one of many modern alternative religious groups that sprouted within decades of each other in western upstate New York, including Mormonism, Perfectionism, nineteenth-century Utopians, Millerites, Shakers, Christian Scientology, and the followers of Jemima Wilkinson, the first American-born woman to found a religious movement. Spiritualists believe that the corporeal world is only one phase of life, and that the spirits of those who have passed from the physical (or have not yet entered it) communicate with us through the special clairvoyant gifts of mediums.5

The epistemology of spiritualist belief is best explained in a discussion by Todd Jay Leonard, a social scientist specializing in American religious history, in which he suggests that communication with the spirit world has been a mainstay of human religious practices since before recorded history. He places modern Spiritualism’s deepest roots in ancient practices of Buddhism, Native American, and African religious practices, all of which demonstrate ritual in which spirits of the dead are fundamental elements. In North America, indigenous religious practice merged with the passionate need for religious freedom of early European immigrants to create a uniquely American religious psyche that allowed for various adaptations of belief throughout the last several centuries. Spiritualism was but one of many newly invented American religions of the early nineteenth century that resulted from this practice of mining and combining select
ancient and European religious principles to accommodate the dramatic social, cultural, and political shifts of the time (Leonard 2005:1–31).

Beyond this specific American climate, nineteenth-century societies were reeling with explosions of scientific discoveries and inventions that provided new, provable explanations for the natural world. Traditional Christian doctrines such as heaven and hell, Jesus as Savior, and even the existence of a life after death no longer made sense when considered next to the precise findings of science (Buescher 2004; Leonard 2005). Contemporary scientific thought usurped the explanations of spirit and afterlife found in long held religious teachings, making it necessary to construct fresh justifications for these concepts because they remained intact as basic beliefs. A search for scientific proof, interpreted as physical evidence by most, ensued, which in turn paved the way for visions, tumbling furniture, and horrific continuous rackets as evidence that the spirit realm did indeed permeate the earthly plane. At the same time, many scientists and religious leaders accepted the kinder notion of the Universalist doctrine that every soul has the opportunity to redeem itself, even after death; eternal damnation did not exist and spirit occurrences gave evidence to support this (Buescher 2004). It was imperative that new religious systems be congruent with modern methodical ways of understanding the world; faith was no longer enough—all belief now required proof and only scientific proof was acceptable.

Science did not, however, immediately provide explanations for the occurrences of inexplicable phenomena that existed within the post-Enlightenment construct of the 1800s. Slowly, early experiments in the intangible sciences of electricity and magnetism began to pave a new understanding of the invisible in scientific terms, thus providing an
acceptable paradigm for looking at connections between the material and spirit worlds.\footnote{\textsuperscript{6}}

Hundreds of free thinking scientists and religious leaders, in particular Universalist\footnote{\textsuperscript{7}} ministers, found the intersection of science and religion in the exploration of mesmerism,\footnote{\textsuperscript{8}} electricity, telepathy, and eventually psychology as a means to prove that spirit existed amongst the living, and in so doing sought to discover a discourse with the invisible dimension, the ultimate proof of a meaningful life beyond the physicality of the body.

Andrew Jackson Davis (Figure 1) is perhaps the most notable philosopher and experimenter with mesmerism connected to the development of modern Spiritualism. While in trance, Davis recorded the content of messages given to him by the deceased eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. These messages became his two-volume work entitled \textit{The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind}, 1847. Public domain.

Figure 1. Andrew Jackson Davis.
to Mankind, published in 1847, in which the laws of nature and its universal governing principles are explained. More importantly, the formation of the Spiritualist religion was predicted in these volumes by Swedenborg’s message that “other spirits would communicate with other human beings” (Braude 2001:34). Davis and a band of Universalist ministers attempted to spread the word of Swedenborg’s message but made slow progress.

Over a period of thirty years beginning in the early 1800s, belief in a life after death outside the traditional heaven and eternal damnation doctrines emerged from the ranks of the Universalist tradition with many permutations and concurrent varied sects. Each new convert brought their own twist to the table, either through their personal religious and life-altering spirit experiences or through the continued experiments with mesmerism, telepathy, electricity and electromagnetism. The theory that natural law controlled both the physical and spirit realms became more widely accepted across America, but decades of writing, researching, and experimentation did not produce the evidentiary proof needed to transform the movement to a full blown religion until 1848, when it descended in a firestorm ignited by two young teenage sisters, Maggie and Katy Fox.

The Fox Sisters and the Onset of Turmoil

Twelve- and fourteen-year-old Katy and Maggie Fox (Figure 2) changed the face of the American religious front with a discovery credited as being the official beginning of modern Spiritualism. In The Reluctant Spiritualist: The Life of Maggie Fox, social historian Nancy Rubin Stuart (2005) follows the life of Maggie beginning with the family move to a small farmhouse (Figure 3) in the tiny hamlet of Hydesville, New York from
Figure 2. Maggie (left) and Katy Fox, 1852
Daguerreotype by Thomas H. Easterly. Reprinted with permission by the Missouri Historical Society.

Figure 3. Hydesville, New York farmhouse in which the Fox family lived and where Maggie and Katy Fox initiated ghostly rappings that are credited with the formalization of the modern Spiritualist religion. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
the sophisticated city of Rochester in December of 1847. Bored with rural life, the feisty girls began to fabricate schemes to relieve their restlessness, the most entertaining of which was terrifying their susceptible mother with ghostly footsteps, and bumps and thumps in the night. This game was no doubt initiated and fed by cues from their mother, Margaret, who often spoke of her grandmother and other relatives having special gifts of intuition and of their communication with the spirit world. She even went so far as to muse aloud about the previous tenants, who they might have been, and the possibility of the cabin being haunted by their spirits. Her temptation was too much for the imaginative teenagers, sparking a winter-long diversion of “haunting” tricks to frighten their mother and delight themselves. The young pranksters accomplished their initial “ghostly footsteps” by tying an apple to a string and incrementally dropping it across the floor in the upstairs bedroom where they slept. A frightened Mrs. Fox would awaken and run upstairs to check on the girls who, by the time she reached them, were tucked away in bed under the covers suppressing giggles and feigning sleep. This early success prompted Katy and Maggie to escalate the hauntings, ultimately leading to the evening of March 31, 1848 when they claimed the raps that had invaded the house for the last several weeks were changed—they were now responses from the ghost to their finger snaps and hand claps. The spirit correctly answered simple numerical questions Mrs. Fox asked, confirming for her predisposed mind, and even that of the skeptical Mr. Fox, that they were communicating with a spirit entity.

Neighbors were immediately called to witness the communications, many providing eyewitness accounts for the records. Through a series of codes mapped out by a neighbor, they learned over the next few days that the rapping ghost was a peddler
named Charles B. Rosna, who had been murdered for his money by previous farmhouse tenants. After slitting his throat, his slayers buried him in the cellar along with his peddler’s tin trunk and there he remained. News of the Fox sisters’ communication with the spirit peddler spread rapidly beyond Hydesville and into the cities. Within months, circles of spirit experimenters began forming across the country in attempts to repeat the communication methods invented by the Fox sisters. Most met with great success, conjuring spirits of their own deceased relatives.

Stuart suggests that it is unclear as to whether the Fox sisters’ spirit game ignited the spirit to communicate or whether this was a continuance of the hoax they had perpetrated upon their mother for amusement alone, and that in all probability, the girls enjoyed their celebrity status immediately following the Hydesville rappings (18). The teenagers were, by all descriptions, fun-loving, energized with youth, and accustomed to all the excitement and distractions offered by a metropolis; farm life was a difficult adjustment for them to make, so much so that being thrust into the center of attention with neighbors extolling their cleverness and amazed at their power was, as Stuart suggests, too enticing to curtail. Stuart’s interpretation of the Fox sisters behavior can be expanded upon by evaluating it as a storytelling event as described by Robert Georges in his article “Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events” (1969). Georges identifies the elements of storytelling framework beginning with the participants selecting social identities of storyteller and listeners, after which the storyteller begins to formulate and transmit the story to the listener. The listener responds to the message, prompting a return response from the storyteller to the feedback, further shaping the message of the story, and continuing in this manner until the storyteller/listener interaction reaches a peak and the
storytelling event comes to an end (310–321). Maggie and Katy performed several storytelling events with their mother, each taking on the roles of storyteller and listener alternatively. Mrs. Fox played the role of storyteller when speaking about her relatives’ abilities to speak with spirits and her musings about the possibilities of spirits of past tenants residing in the farmhouse. The girls, as listeners, responded to her stories with their haunting games, to which their mother responded back with fear and an even deeper conviction that the spirits did indeed exist. The storytelling event peaked, in this case, on the evening the peddler ghost joined the conversation, at which point Maggie and Katy took on the role of the storytellers. They became the fabricators, or depending on point of view, the conduit of the peddler’s story, which unfolded based on the questions and responses of all who agreed to participate as “listeners” to corroborate the peddler’s rappings. Maggie and Katy received positive responses to their “story” with each session held with the peddler ghost and the growing circle of neighbors, whose questions and expected responses guided them to ever more elaborate details. Some might argue that the girls became the storytellers well before that evening because they continually accelerated the haunting tricks in response to their mother’s reactions to the events. Even if the roles of storyteller and listener are bounced betwixt and between these participants, Katy and Maggie’s activities in Hydesville (and after) fit into Georges’ storytelling model quite neatly. I modeled this comparative analysis after Michael Owen Jones’ correlation of Georges’ storytelling structure to the “material behavior” of making art pieces, in which the behavior changes as a result of feedback, thus “directly shape[ing] the output” (1997: 203). Although material behavior concepts had been discussed for years, Jones was the first to articulate this specific definition, officially coining the term material
behavior and suggesting it can be applied to any “activity involved in producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world” (1997:202). In Jones’ example, he follows the artistic style development of sculptor Helen Codero as she reacts to the desires and specific requests of those collecting her work. Although she intertwined her own experiences and imagination into the end product, she changed her work to produce what clients requested, creating art in response to their expectations, and thus producing an end result shaped by their input. The Fox sisters exhibited material behavior in the same manner: their “product” was the ghost rappings, which they adapted in response to the questions and expectations of their listeners. In their case, the physical manifestation of the presence of the peddler ghost, the rappings, was the physical dimension required for material behavior.

Material behavior is exhibited by Lily Dale residents today, often intertwined with personal and family identities just as it may have been with Maggie, Katy, and their mother’s verbal reflections regarding ancestral interaction with the spirit world, providing another explanation of the teens’ behavior beyond its role in directing youthful pranks. The information Mrs. Fox, as storyteller, shared with the girls regarding her “grandmother and other relatives” possessing special gifts may have ignited desires in the girls to connect with their ancestors, provoking a response they imagined their “gifted” relatives might have had, albeit to the teenagers, a made-up game. Katy and Maggie, both of pubescent age in which a personal search for identity is inherent, were displaced from a comfortable environment into a distasteful (from their perspective) and foreign surrounding. Their personal and physical states of transition created a liminal existence that was mirrored in spirit games that offered an identity in direct line with their distant
relatives who also lived in a liminal world. Katy and Maggie became part of something larger than themselves by inventing a game they knew their mother would believe, while sympathetically experiencing their ancestors’ power. Their performances were reenacted pieces of the supernatural narrative as told by their mother, and therefore considered ostensions in that they exhibited a “dramatic extension into real life” (Ellis 2001:41). In this analysis, the material behavior application remains intact in the ostension because the motivation for the response is not a factor; the behavioral changes manifested by the interactions of the storyteller and listeners shape the final result. Whether Maggie and Katy were mischievous teens, had deeper unconscious motivations, or truly awakened a sleeping spirit, their activity resulted in an entirely new outcome—communication with the spirit of a dead person. Instead of mere haunted raps, the likes of which others had experiences along with other physical phenomenon, the sisters were having direct dialog with someone who had passed over to the other side of death—proof that the spirit realm did indeed exist. Their material behavior resulted in a discovery that had up to that point escaped hundreds of theologians’ and scientists’ ardent experiments with the invisible sciences, creating the seed from which the official Spiritualist religion flowered.

The Fox sisters’ lives after Hydesville were dramatically transformed from the rural life they claimed to despise, but were of such a tumultuous nature the girls most likely did not consider their new circumstances an improvement. In addition, their experiences over the forty years that followed their short time in Hydesville are reflective of the atmosphere in which Lily Dale was established. Within weeks of the appearance of the peddler ghost, Leah Fox Underhill the oldest Fox sister born 23 years before
fourteen-year-old Maggie and still living in Rochester, rescued her young sisters and mother from the droves of spirit seekers who descended upon their farmhouse, moving them back to the city to share her home. The curious were plentiful in Rochester as well; the teenagers’ spirit abilities immediately prompted requests for informal spirit knocking and rapping demonstrations from friends and acquaintances. Andrew Jackson Davis, upon hearing of the Hydesville rappings, invited the sisters to visit him in his home in New York City where he interviewed the sisters and witnessed their spirit communications, subsequently writing the book *Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse* in which he explains the phenomenon through his own philosophies of spirit communication and provides written instructions regarding the formation of spirit circles, which became the foundation of future Spiritualist practices (Braude:2001:35).

Stuart, while acknowledging Davis’ role in the Spiritualist movement from the philosophical standpoint, suggests that Leah was the marketing genius and taskmaster behind the Fox sister’s trajectory into fame, fueling the eruption of mimic mediums in America with her concept of “offer[ing] access to individual spirits through dramatic raps and séances” (97). Joining Leah in her enthusiasm were Amy and Isaac Post, Quaker abolitionists and close friends of the family who quickly accepted the sisters’ claims of spirit communication as truth. Their interest in spreading the good news merged with Leah’s keen sense for promotion, so that within a short time, the parlor message sessions evolved into back-to-back séances, spirit circles, and private readings for well-to-do clients for fees. Next came evening stage performances for audiences both sympathetic and hostile. Invitations began to arrive for appearances in cities outside of Rochester, provoking Leah, now a medium herself, to take her young charges on the road. The next
several years were consumed with the fatigues of show business layered with bizarre and often frightening situations of violent clashes between believers and nonbelievers.

“Vigilante religious zealots who equated spiritualism with devil-worship” (82) fired gunshots at Maggie through the windows of a friend’s home, initiating Maggie’s lifelong struggle with depression and withdrawal (82; Weisberg 2005:120). The obstinate and precocious teenagers often refused to produce their spirit knockings, digging in their heals when the schedule, ridicule, or humiliations (both girls were once strip searched to ensure they held no tricks in their underclothing, causing tears of embarrassment for both) became unbearable (Stuart 2005:54). Katy and Maggie regularly looked for ways to flee the constant spirit performances; they felt defenseless, and quite possibly remorseful, for not only were their lives strictly controlled by the demands of their schedule, but they were trapped in a game of their own invention by their fantastic claims believed by thousands, and to make matters more complicated, they had become the sole providers for the entire Fox family. As the girls matured, their refusals to cooperate were more successful; Katy eventually married and left the circuit although she continued to give clairvoyant messages with stunning skill, but Maggie alternated between retirement and performing depending on her financial needs—Spiritualist practice was her only means of support through most of her life. Both women subsequently suffered emotional upheavals, bouts of severe alcoholism, disastrous personal relationships, and grave financial difficulties in adulthood.

Forty years after the initial rapping, Maggie confessed to fraud, with Katy’s agreement, in a public appearance in New York City in which she removed her shoes and stockings to demonstrate, on stage and in the aisles, the toe joint popping techniques she
and Katy used to create the ghostly rapping noises. She spoke with newspaper reporters and authored a book through a ghostwriter entitled *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, causing frenzy across the world. Both women were tempted with cash to go on tour, enabling the entire world to see for itself the joint popping scam and thereby denounce Spiritualism as a farce once and for all. Katy initially agreed to tour but never participated; however, Maggie was compelled to follow through, most likely for the income. Much debate surrounds the true motivations for the confession: both sisters were in financial straits and were paid for demonstrating the scam, Katy mentions her regret of the confession in a letter to a friend, and one year later Maggie herself recanted the confession and embraced Spiritualism with an indisputable determination “to correct her earlier accusations of a fraudulent spirit world” (Stuart 2005:310). In the end Maggie’s damaging confession of fraud did not dissuade the millions of believers in Spiritualism; the fact that one medium admitted to fraud made no difference—converts each had personal spirit experiences, both with and without the aid of mediums, confirming that communication with the spirit realm was not only possible but a reality, for they had witnessed it themselves (Buescher 2004:124). Maggie remained a Spiritualist to the end of her life; physicians attending an immobile Maggie at her deathbed spoke of hearing continual knockings emanating from the walls, ceiling, and floor, providing evidence she ultimately remained faithful to her Hydesville spirit claims (Stuart 2005:312).

The Fox sisters’ saga represents the plethora of actions and reactions by those who held strong beliefs about religion, social responsibilities, and grieving in the days of the Spiritualist rise in America. Maggie and Katy’s entanglements and contradictory stances were not isolated occurrences recounted here for entertainment and voyeuristic purposes.
(although they fill that role well) but serve as a vehicle to unfold the drama, passion, and high emotions that infiltrated America during the days of experimentation, exploration, and reforms in the nineteenth century. They embody the scandal, poor choices, overreaction, and extraordinary reputation that is the legacy under which Lily Dale residents position themselves today.

Women’s Rights and Spiritualism

In 1848, three months after the Hydesville rappings, a group of dissident Quakers met twenty miles away at a Seneca Falls Convention in New York with the distinct purpose of joining forces to promote social, civil, and religious reform for women, marking the start of the Women’s Rights Movement. The participants in the convention had heard of the peddler’s rappings and fully accepted the premise of a spirit afterlife—it melded seamlessly with their belief that every human was created in the image of God (an entity outside the physical realm) that connected all things through an “unbroken chain of communication.” Talking to spirits was a utilization of that universal link (Braude 2001:13). It was reported that the table on which Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott signed the official agenda for the conference was rocked by rappings and that raps were also heard at Stanton’s home (58).

Spiritualists signed on for all the social reform movements of the late nineteenth century that promoted freedom of choice and the elimination of repression including the abolition of slavery, marriage reform, labor, dress, and health reform, temperance, socialism, and vegetarianism (3). Spiritualism’s widespread acceptance of social reform paired with its nature to reveal truth “to individuals without recourse to external
authority," made the religion a “magnet for social and political radicals throughout the
nineteenth century” (57). To the Spiritualists, the Women’s Rights Movement was the
most consistent and considered the most important social cause in light of the role women
played within the religion. Spiritualists received their spirit knowledge through mediums
independent of any authority other than the spirit who spoke through them. Followers
were able to speak directly with spirit one-on-one with no interference from an organized
religious institution or restrictive doctrines, awakening an appreciation for the value of
the individual, which in turn was transferred to the role of women and an individual
woman’s rights in all matters in her life. Ann Braude, in Radical Spirits, explains the
dynamic that made this reasoning plausible in the following passage describing the social
construct in which women were so readily accepted as the leaders of Spiritualism:

Spiritualism embraced the notion that women were pious by nature. But, instead of
concluding that the qualities that suited women to religion unsuited them to public
roles, Spiritualism made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly
attributed to femininity a virtue and lauded it as a qualification for religious
leadership. If women had special spiritual sensitivities, then it followed that they
could sense spirits, which is precisely what mediums did. Nineteenth-century
stereotypes of femininity were used to bolster the case for female mediumship . . .
The very qualities that rendered women incompetent when judged against norms for
masculine behavior rendered them capable of mediumship. Mediumship allowed
women to discard limitations on women’s role without questioning accepted ideas
about woman’s nature. (83)

In other words, the individual characteristics that defined a “proper” woman’s demeanor
in the nineteenth century—pure, weak, passive, impressionable, susceptible, uneducated,
and therefore incapable of performing any role outside a domestic one—were
conveniently the most attractive to spirit. Spirit chose mediums who “passively allowed
spirits to communicate through them” giving mediums unprecedented roles in leadership
and public life without their having to make the bold decision to rebel against the social
norms they were constrained to live within. The weaker, younger, and more innocent the medium, the more believable they were in their mediumship, as illustrated by the high numbers of young, pretty teenage girls who enjoyed extraordinary success as trance mediums in the 1850s, espousing complicated philosophical concepts on stages across the country. Surely, the common thought went, spirit was speaking through these young women because any other explanation of such eloquence and wisdom did not exist within the person herself (83–87). This suggests that the freshness of youth was a definite advantage for Katy and Maggie Fox in their early years promoting their spirit abilities, and is evidence that they served possibly inadvertently, as inspirations for the teen and pre-teen girls who followed in their footsteps. The young women who became trance mediums may have done so as a way to become a part of the world that would ordinarily be closed to them if they followed the expected path set forth for them by the male dominated society. By becoming trance mediums they were able to travel, perform for large attentive audiences that hung on each word they uttered in trance in the name of a more learned spirit than themselves. It provided a certain freedom not available through any other means, and was in part, a path paved by the self-induced entrapment of Maggie and Katy Fox only a few years before, an ironic outcome that I suspect was lost on the Fox sisters.

Spiritualism and women’s rights were networked in a mesh of mutual interests around which they shared leadership, stages, and audiences across the country. Throughout Radical Spirits Braude outlines an intricate relationship between Spiritualism and the Women’s Rights Movement, crediting the religion as the predominant agent for the dispersion of women’s rights advocacy across America. So we might ask what role the
very first Spiritualists, Maggie and Katy Fox, played in the women’s movement? Both women’s lives were devastated by excessive alcoholism and the natural consequences of other irresponsible choices, limiting their interests to a small personal sphere. Stuart observes that Maggie held little interest in the women’s rights movement or any other of the social reform initiatives that pervaded the cultural and political climates in her adult years (258–259). This lack of interest on Maggie’s part suggests that, in spite of her status as a main character in the formation of the modern Spiritualist religion and her long but intermittent work as a medium, she was interested only in how it would serve her personally rather than the broader scope of the tenets of the religion. She was, what I characterize, an “accidental Spiritualist” who did not fit Braude’s generalization that “all Spiritualists” supported women’s rights. Those who entered Spiritualism after the Fox sisters did so of their own choice, in spite of the social construct of “being chosen by spirit.” In contrast, the choices Maggie and Katy made in the days following the Hydesville rappings had nothing to do with personal or religious philosophy, but rather were immature responses to a predicament of their own invention. They, like the other women intricately involved in Spiritualism, were negotiating their positions within the confines of their gender and personal circumstance.

The partnership between Spiritualism and women’s rights had both positive and negative results for both groups. As already mentioned, the successful outcome of the Women’s Rights Movement and subsequent Women’s Suffrage Movement, were nurtured by the positive, welcoming response of the Spiritualists who saw value in the efforts to free women from the societal bondage of a male dominated society, giving a space for the women’s movement to grow and prosper. In 1887 Marion Skidmore (Figure
4), who along with her husband Thomas J. (Figure 5) was a founding member of Lily Dale (then called Cassadaga Camp), invited Suffragists to meet on the campgrounds, initiating what is now the annual Women’s Day event (Hersey 1954:49). Susan B. Anthony, Rev. Anna Howard Shaw, and many other reformers spoke on the stages in Lily Dale and other Spiritualist auditoriums in response to this invitation and many

Figure 4. Marion Skidmore, one of the founders of the Cassadaga Lake Free Association and first to invite Women Suffragists to speak at Lily Dale. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
like it across the country, taking advantage of the widespread opportunities to reach accepting and like-minded audiences they would otherwise not be able to address, and thus providing a “major vehicle for the spread of women’s rights ideas in mid-century America” (Braude 2001:57). In *Radical Spirits*, Braude goes so far as to say that the widespread investigations of spirit manifestations benefited the women’s movement, inferring the national notoriety caused by the attempts to prove fraudulent spirit claims, inadvertently put a spotlight on the women’s movement issues (57). So in the same manner that some modern marketers espouse that all attention, whether positive or
negative, makes an imprint on the human psyche and is therefore valuable, the women’s movement causes became more prevalent in the minds of the public through its association with Spiritualism’s notoriety. The ultimate outcome of the initial goals of both the women’s movement and the early Spiritualists were changed because of the mutual responses to and acceptance of each other. First, women’s rights speakers were seen and heard as a result of Spiritualists’ acceptance, eventually succeeding in getting the vote for women, something that very well might have taken years longer to accomplish without this association. The Spiritualists, who rejected dominance of one group or sector over another, particularly male dominance over the female fate, found an ally in the women’s movement, which provided credence to the overarching position of freedom imbedded in the foundation of Spiritualist belief, allowing women ever more power and control within their lives outside the family unit. The dynamics of the groups’ interactions resulted in altered outcomes for both; however, with the benefit of hindsight, Braude makes retrospective note that the two factions were not in perfect harmony when recording their own histories. Spiritualism provided an intricate and widespread web of public access for “a relentless group of [non-Spiritualist] women’s rights advocates who operated outside the mainstream of the women’s movement” and who for decades edited newspapers, wrote books, chaired conventions, and lectured “almost exclusively” on “women’s emancipation.” At the same time, Spiritualist mediums, both trance and normal, regularly included women’s rights topics in their public speaking lectures alongside their Spiritualist teachings. Spiritualist women’s rights champions promoted their non-Spiritualist sisters’ activities in every effort including coverage of their events and lectures in Spiritualist newspapers, promoting their books in Spiritualist bookstores,
and working side-by-side on the same women’s rights publications, yet were completely left out of the records written by the non-Spiritualist reformers. Braude suggests that this may be due to the “canonization” of the three-volume history of the women’s movement, *History of Woman Suffrage*, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, which does not include the significant contributions of the Spiritualist women’s rights reformers. One explanation Braude provides is that the editors were unaware of the work of the Spiritualist women’s rights advocates (2001:80–81). This is very unlikely in light of the intimate connection the groups shared, working side-by-side on lecture platforms and in publishing organizations. Another explanation Braude provides is more likely: the non-Spiritualists distanced themselves from the religion due to the extreme views of the Spiritualists in all matters of freedom (including marriage, sexual, and any number of other individual freedoms) coupled with the global fervor to discredit the religion. In contrast, Spiritualists have been and are to this day extremely proud of their religion’s early involvement with the reformers; Lily Dale residents often speak of it in conversation, and a dedicated space to artifacts and photographs of official Suffragist meetings held on the grounds in the Lily Dale museum gives evidence to their continued view of the relevance of the association of the two groups. The resulting history of the women’s movement is an altered and incomplete record as a result of omission of an undeniable yet obviously uncomfortable relationship with a group they felt tarnished their journey.
Physical Manifestation of Spirit Gone Wild

The Fox sisters were not the first to declare evidence of spirit; however, their original communication with the peddler ghost and the ensuing flood of mimetic mediums that followed changed the way in which these manifestations were viewed. Prior to the peddler ghost, no one had a dialog with the dead, making previous spirit encounters little more than anecdotal episodes. Now the stakes were higher—Maggie, Katy, and the rest of the spirit mediums were proving through physical means that the spirits existed, and better yet, they were talking. Spirits answered questions that only they, the dead, would know therefore providing proof to a widower, for instance, that his wife was speaking to him because she revealed a secret that only the two were privy to. The greatest impact of this was confirmation that heaven and hell did not exist, that a life could be redeemed through efforts after death, and that physical life was but a mere point in the overall existence of a soul.

To fully understand the extent and context of the pandemonium surrounding Spiritualism, and by extension that of early Lily Dale and its residents, I present a few of the evidential spirit manifestation practices that ran rampant in an attempt to prove the legitimacy of spirit both inside and outside of the Lily Dale gates; some are referred to in my research interviews by my participants, reinforcing the lasting effect the controversy has on the town’s residents. Individually, each practice held ample opportunity for reactions on both sides of the debate; collectively they dusted up a groundswell of conflict. Common practices were:

1. Floating spirit trumpets (elongated telescoping metal cones) floated about a séance circle projecting spirit voices to those present (Figure 6).
2. In table tipping sessions, several people hover their fingertips along the edges of a table, calling spirit who subsequently rocks the furniture, sometimes making it dance across the room or completely tip over.

3. Ectoplasm (spirit matter) often oozed from the orifices of mediums’ bodies during deep trance. It resembled a wet, mushy gauze-like material (Figure 7). Today, a more familiar version is a slimy, gooey gel, as seen in the movie *Ghost Busters*.

4. Spirit paintings are most often portraits of deceased persons that automatically appeared on blank canvases when mediums with power to incite such a phenomenon were present. In Lily Dale, the Campbell Brothers (who were not really brothers) and the Bangs Sisters (who really were sisters) are the most renowned of the mediums with this ability (Figures 8, 9). Personal accounts describe sessions in which individuals watched an image of their deceased family member slowly appear upon the white surface of the canvas they themselves provided, with no physical interference from human hands (Nagy 2008a). Many spirit paintings created in the presence of the Campbell Brothers and the Bangs Sisters hang in Lily Dale public spaces (Figure 10). The Campbell Brothers’ paintings are identified by a characteristic flag placed in the image (Figure 11), which was considered the signature of spirit.

5. Spontaneous slate writing produced written messages from deceased persons with supposedly no interference from the medium. Spontaneous slate writing was achieved by placing a piece of graphite or chalk between two slates, which were then tied together and placed under the table with one edge held by the medium and the other held by the person requesting the message. Often scratching sounds
were heard during this position. When the slates were untied, written messages from spirit appeared on the slates (Figures 12, 13).

6. Spirit photographs from the late-nineteenth century were images in which the specter of a dead person or spirit guide appeared within the frame of a living person. These eventually led to images of ectoplasm emitting from mediums during séance, and a variety of other supernatural images. This is discussed at greater length in the Photography Section of this paper (Figures 14, 15).

Figure 6. Ron Nagy, Lily Dale Museum director, holds a spirit trumpet. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
The Spirit picture above, taken several years ago, shows The Editor of PSYCHIC OBSERVER, R. G. Pressing, sitting in a room of The Cassadaga Hotel, Cassadaga, Fla. The face of the brother of the Editor can be plainly seen in the ectoplasmic substance which when photographed looked nothing like the terribly patched-up photograph (No. 8) appearing on this page.

This is the same Spirit picture that was reprinted by LIFE Magazine (July, 1937).

Before the Editors of LIFE published this Spirit picture they insisted on having the original negative turned over to them to be examined by their New York City expert photographers.

After examination was made, ‘LIFE’ declared: “We have never seen a negative like this before—we cannot explain it—we do not know what kind of photography it is—BUT we do know what it IS NOT. It is positively NOT a double exposure.”

Furthermore, the Editor of PSYCHIC OBSERVER knows about this Spirit picture, taken by a well known medium,—with the Editor’s own Brownie No. 2 camera, in which the film was placed by the Editor himself.

Figure 7. Ectoplasm emanating from medium’s body in a newspaper clipping from unidentified source in scrapbook in Lily Dale Museum. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
Figure 8. Campbell Brothers, spirit painters and Lily Dale residents. Reprint from scrapbook page in Lily Dale Museum. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.

Figure 9. Bangs Sisters at Lily Dale. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
Figure 10. Photograph taken in 1982 of a Bangs Sisters’ spirit painting that hangs in the Maplewood Hotel lobby. The figure of a man can be seen in the bottom left of this image. According to Nagy, no glass was on the canvas nor was anyone else in the lobby at the time the image was exposed. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.

Figure 11. Portraits painted by the Campbell Brothers, spirit painters whose canvases always contained the white “flag,” a signature of spirit. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
Figure 12. Examples of slates with spontaneous writings displayed in the Lily Dale museum. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 13. Slate with spirit writing in Lily Dale Museum. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
Figure 14. Spirit Photograph on back of framed letter in Lily Dale Museum. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.

Figure 15. Set of spirit photographs displayed in Lily Dale museum. P.L.O.A. are initials for Pierre Louis Ormand Augustus, the names of the husbands of his mother’s four sisters. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
Each of these physical manifestations of spirit can be individually described as examples of material behavior. Each activity is involved in “producing or responding to the physical dimension” (Jones 1997:202); the act of causing the physical manifestation to occur and a reaction to the manifestation itself are both poised around the physical element of the spirit appearance and is therefore, by Jones’ definition, material behavior. Jones’ model of comparing material behavior to Georges’ storytelling model can also be demonstrated in these activities of spirit manifestation in that the actions of the spirit medium are a response to the expectations and interaction with those who have come to them for connection to spirit, and the outcome is a result of that interaction. The Fox sisters set the pattern of this behavior for all mediums to follow. As mediums and their clients quickly became familiar with the idea of spirit manifestation, their imaginative interchanges prompted a variety of ingenious spirit materializations to evolve. And although the manifestations, like the material objects created as a result of material behavior as described by Jones, are not the primary target for understanding the cultural aspects of the Spiritualists, they were considered proof of the existence of life after death, and therefore represent a lightening rod for the conflict between believers and their critics.

The acts of physical spirit appearance were challenged in Lily Dale and anywhere else Spiritualists practiced. For every believer there were several debunkers attempting to discredit all mediums, who in their eyes were swindlers preying on the grief of others. Paranormal investigators came in disguise to catch frauds red-handed in the act of subterfuge, often accomplishing that mission. Mediums and photographers who were exposed as frauds, or occasionally only suspected of perpetrating scams, were prosecuted
and jailed, threatened with vigilante lynching, or tucked away in asylums. On the flip side, some mediums endured scrupulous investigations yet were never found to be perpetrating a deceit. There are cases in which the investigators were so convinced by the performance that they themselves became believers and outspoken proponents, or at minimum were impressed by the skills exhibited, in spite of their confidence that a trick had been successfully perpetrated under their watch (Stuart 2005).

In discussing the Spiritualist religion during its peak, Crista Cloutier (Cheroux et al. 2004:20) states, “Spiritualism was immensely popular—it was rumored that séances took place in the White House—but it also had powerful detractors, mainly in the scientific and religious establishment.” The latter part of this statement is somewhat surprising, and in fact misleading, when considering the movement was begun and consistently advanced by scientists and religious leaders in the first half of the nineteenth-century. While many individuals in the hard sciences and established traditional religious communities worked diligently to close the door on spiritualism, representatives from all walks of life joined them in their efforts, including the magician Harry Houdini, the master of the bizarre display, P. T. Barnum, and writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to name only a few. Likewise, proponents and ardent supporters of Spiritualism were found in judges, U.S. legislators, newspaper magnates, writers, as well as religious leaders and scientists. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Upton Sinclair, New York Appeals Court Justice John Worth Edmonds, and a large number of religious leaders including “prominent Unitarian ministers Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Theodore Parker” (Stuart 2005:177) joined the ranks of Spiritualist supporters. Dr. Robert Hare, who in 1853 felt it his “duty to his fellow creatures . . . to stem the tide of ‘popular madness’” sat through
several séances and became so “disquieted by the sight” of moving tables he put together a device of weights, zinc balls, metal plates, and an alphabet wheel to experiment with the phenomenon. His conversion was imminent when the medium he chose for the first trial touched the zinc balls and several tables in the room moved. Additional experiments convinced Hare that he had reached the spirits of his deceased father and two sons (Stuart 2005:174–75). Todd Jay Leonard discusses the book Hare wrote two years later and the implications of his credentials to the Spiritualist movement in the following passage:

A book written by a Dr. Robert Hare, MD in 1855, when Spiritualism was still in its infancy, was solely dedicated to the experimental investigation of phenomena. *Spiritualism: Scientifically Demonstrated*, offered readers of the day scientifically based information to collaborate the existence of spirit communication, including diagrams of scientific contraptions used to prove the continuance of life after death. On the title page of his book, Dr. Hare lists his credentials—Emeritus Professor of Chemistry in the University of Pennsylvania, graduate of Yale College and Harvard University, Associate of the Smithsonian Institute, and a member of various learned societies—which illustrates, in part, how seriously the movement was regarded by not only common folk, but also by academia and the educated classes. The need for scientific proof was great in the psyches of people at this time because it seemed possible to be able to fuse religion, science, and philosophy together. For the first time in human history, Spiritualism offered people a religion founded not solely on divine revelation, but upon scientific investigation. (Leonard 2005:72)

Spiritualism cut a swath across society among its followers and its detractors.

Generalizations such as Cloutier’s suggesting that specific economic class and professions fell in line on one side of the Spiritualist debate do not fully demonstrate the breadth of interest shown by all of the societies where the Spiritualist movement thrived, both in America and Europe.
Spiritualism Goes Legal

If one looks beyond the sensational nature of the Fox sisters’ story and the fantastical accounts of spirit manifestations and subsequent brouhaha, it becomes evident that Spiritualism sits at the heart of human suffering and palliative mourning practice when considering those who seek reassurance regarding the happiness and safe passage of a loved one after their death. Much of the scandal in the early days of the Spiritualist movement had at its core the conflicting efforts of scam artists to make a buck and local authorities and do-gooders compelled to protect the grieving innocent. Negotiating the middle ground were two groups—those mediums sincerely attempting to make connections with something outside the physical world and the mourners whose pain was eased by a medium’s spirit communication they thought to be valid. By the 1890s the Spiritualists’ public stage performances had shifted from being hosted predominantly by young trance female mediums to non-trance men and Suffrage women speakers, who far outnumbered their popular predecessors. There was a divide within these Spiritualists in that the trance mediums embraced the freedom and lack of structure they had become so accustomed to, while the men and Suffragists felt the uncontrolled bizarre manifestations were turning Spiritualism into a worldwide joke to be ridiculed. Loosely organized Spiritualist associations had already been established in a variety of cities but did not have influence over the movement as a whole, encouraging more structured organizations to form. One of these was the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC), incorporated in 1893 in reaction to displays of phony spirit manifestations by medium imitators and the long-endured accusations of fraud against serious practitioners (Stuart 2005:315). By incorporating the religion, Spiritualists legitimized their practice, thereby
providing a legal route to charter churches, associations, camps, and educational institutions. The NSAC was headquartered on the property of the Cassadaga Lake Free Association campgrounds, now known as Lily Dale, and is considered by many to be the main governing body of the religion today, although other longstanding, yet smaller, organizations remain active.

Differing accounts put the religion’s peak numbers from one to ten million in the beginning of the twentieth century in America. Today the NSAC has over one hundred and fifty individual churches across the United States and 7,000 practicing members. It is estimated that possibly hundreds of thousands more claim spiritualist beliefs, yet at the same time are affiliated with other religions (Stuart 2005:315). Official Spiritualist mediumship now requires extensive mandatory training with credentials awarded only after program course completion and passage of standardized testing where evidential spirit information must be provided a minimum of three times to examiner panels. Only then can a medium claim to be a registered spirit medium and hang an open for business sign in Lily Dale. These requirements provide a standard framework of knowledge and practice that clients can rely on, in theory, eliminating the possibility of charlatan practices in Lily Dale, and gives the mediums protection from interference from the law or vigilante hotheads. Fringe groups still occasionally make their opposing views known, especially when the media is present to record the protests; however, since they are not allowed through the town gates, they must protest at a distance.
PARTNERSHIP OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND SPIRITUALISM

Photography’s connection to Spiritualism is an intimate one and remains one of the most controversial activities associated with it. Although their modern historical timelines coincide, they did not cross paths until 1861, twenty years after Spiritualism took hold in America and serendipitously at the dawn of the Civil War.

From its very first application in the Renaissance, photography has had one foot in the scientific scene and another in an array of other disciplines. The precursor to the modern camera, the *camera obscura*, was developed by sixteenth-century artists who turned to discoveries in mathematics and optics to solve problems of perspective when creating the more realistic painting style that emerged during this period. The camera obscura quickly became an experimental device for determined scientists and artists who had strived for centuries to discover a method to produce a permanent image with reflected light. Three hundred years later, during the decade of 1830, simultaneous and sometimes clandestine advancements by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre in France, and the team of William Henry Fox Talbot and Sir John Herschel in England, led to the permanent image process still in use in wet darkrooms (Newhall 1978:1–32). Professional photography studios immediately opened across the industrialized world, establishing photography as both a science and an art form approximately ten years before the Fox sisters communicated with Rosna, the murdered peddler ghost, and twenty years before the onset of the Civil War. Portraits, street scenes, and landscapes were the most common images made; however still life and more notably, postmortem images were also immediately popular.\(^{16}\)
Surprisingly, although much experimentation was done by nineteenth-century scientists in every imaginable discipline to prove the existence of spirits and thus provide scientific physical evidence that Spiritualism was no hoax, there is no indication that any photographers attempted to use the newest physical science—photography—as a means to that end. The deliberate act of a photographer did not produce the first “spirit photograph,” as one might suspect. It was the ineptness of a rank amateur and his perpetuation of a joke that created the first photograph of spirit in March of 1861.

William H. Mumler, a jeweler’s clerk, while alone in a friend’s photography studio, practiced his new interest in photography by making a self-portrait exposure. By his own account, Mumler was surprised at the “second” that appeared in his photograph, and because of his inexperience was unaware of what could have produced the faint image of a young girl next to his own. He showed the image to the veteran operator in the studio who explained that the translucent figure was the result of Mumler’s using a previously used plate that had not be cleaned sufficiently, leaving a portion of the original image for a second development alongside his own. Mumler, amused by the image, printed a copy and took it to his office to show his friends. A Spiritualist gentleman stopped by Mumler’s office, prompting Mumler to recall the image. Wanting to have a bit of fun at his visitor’s expense, Mumler pulled out the image and showed it to the Spiritualist, telling him he had taken it of himself with no other person in the room. The gentleman asked Mumler if he would put that statement on the back of the photo and sign it. Mumler accommodated him and handed him the signed photograph, thinking that the joke was complete and that he would never hear of it again. A week later the photograph, accompanied by a full story (naming the studio location and Mumler), appeared in the
Mumler put the incident aside only to learn that the entire article had been reprinted in the Boston Spiritualist paper, the *Banner of Light*. Since it made the hometown papers, Mumler thought it best to tell the photo studio owners of the “mischief” he had done, but upon his arrival at the studio several men rushed upon him, gleefully congratulating him on taking the first spirit photograph. The excited group rejected as impossible, all of Mumler’s attempts to explain the double exposure. Two persons insisted that Mumler make images of them that very evening. After much protestation Mumler did make several images of both gentlemen and to his surprise and their delight, captured a spirit for one of them. The success of the sitting, in much the same manner as the Fox sisters’ rappings, caused a sensation of such magnitude that within months Mumler quit his twenty year position as a jewelry engraver to pursue his new profession as the first “spirit photographer” (Kaplan 2008). Mumler claimed, again mimicking the behavior of the Fox sisters twenty years earlier, that he did nothing to manipulate the images, that the imprints were the work of the spirits themselves dropping in on the physical world. Mumler pursued his spirit photography in Boston, charging ten dollars for a portrait with no guarantee of results in a time when a typical fee for a portrait was twenty-five cents. In 1863 the image of a spirit in one of Mumler’s photographs was recognized as a person who was still alive, labeling Mumler a fraud and forcing him back to the jewelry bench. Five years later he resurrected his spirit photography career in New York, making a comeback so successful that within months, and over 500 spirit images later, he bought the photography studio in which he worked. A week after the purchase Mumler was
arrested on charges of fraud and larceny and was jailed. His preliminary hearing was treated as a trial and garnered international press coverage. After days of testimony from Spiritualists, well-respected photographers, and eminent clients Mumler was acquitted of the charges and the question of spirit photography remained unresolved (Cheroux et al. 2004). Many other photographers were charged and convicted of fraudulent practices between 1861 into the early 1900s but I describe Mumler’s experience because of its concise yet complete reflection of the cultural climate of the Spiritualist scene. Mumler was the first and most well-known of the spirit photographers with clients of high social and political standing, and his techniques had been closely scrutinized by at least two respected professional photographers who found nothing out of line in his technique, leaving a tinge of question regarding his practices. His clients, with very few exceptions, were immensely satisfied with his work, which routinely eased their hearts with images of their dearly departed. Possibly the most relevant factor in Mumler’s story is that it humanizes the bizarre events surrounding spirit photography, which is more often viewed for the object itself rather than merely the end result of a philosophy, motive, and ultimately a material behavior. Mumler’s clients requested images with spirit in them, therefore he produced an object that reflected his interaction with his clients and manifested their expectations.

Mumler, following the same trajectory as the Fox sisters, died alone and in poverty, a victim of his own ambitions. It strikes me as unusual that in the many accounts I have read about Maggie and Katy Fox and William Mumler none has compared their remarkably similar passages into and through Spiritualism beginning with their pioneer status brought on by unwitting initial discoveries; their eagerness to take advantage of the
good fortune of those discoveries without paying heed to potential consequences; their careers riddled with enormous celebrity and scandal; and finally, their tragic decline brought on by their own choices. In putting both histories into the context of Spiritualism and its proponents’ quest to prove the continuity of life with physical evidence (the product of both the Fox and Mumler activities), a comparison of the two merit further research (outside of this study), in particular in the context of material behavior patterns contained within all Spiritualist practice.

Why was spirit photography seemingly swallowed hook, line, and sinker by many educated members of the Spiritualist community? Louis Kaplan in *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*, discusses work done by Sir David Brewster, the inventor of the kaleidoscope, whose 1856 publication *The Stereoscope: Its History, Theory, and Construction* includes a chapter entitled “Applications of the Stereoscope to Purposes of Amusement,” which is devoted entirely to the notion that the photographer “establishes the relationship between technology and the occult with a sleight of hand and a parlor trick that is made in the name of levity” (2008:27). Kaplan describes Brewster’s in-depth instructions to make a ghostly form appear in a photograph by having people move in and out of the frame during a long exposure. Brewster warns of becoming victim to such trickery, explaining it is within the photographer’s duties to entertain with his art so it should be viewed as entertainment and not taken seriously. Photography, although a relatively new technology during Mumler’s time, had already been considered and written about in terms of the manipulations that could be and were being practiced for purposes of “amusement.” And although the average citizen may not have understood the details of how photography was accomplished, Mumler’s purported explanation of his
first “trick” spirit photograph as a double exposure should have been easily understood, clearing up any misunderstanding as to what made the “spirit” in the image. But his explanations were not accepted. Possibly one interpretation is that the Spiritualists were committed to the idea that science was the only acceptable answer to questions of any nature, and even more so with spirit because relying on pure faith as the answer to a religious question would preclude educated thought, a self-identified Spiritualist characteristic. A leap to accept science without thought to validate the efficacy of the results seems to have been an irony that did not concern them; photography could be one of the preeminent tools in the search for that proof and because the camera captured reality relentlessly it only made sense that if spirit did exist, it would show up in a photograph—no need to go any further. Voila! This propensity to accept technological evidence simply because it is technology is supported by Susan Sontag’s analysis of interpretation of reality through imagery:

Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images; and philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an image-free way of apprehending the real. But when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the standard finally seemed attainable, the retreat of old religious and political illusions before the advance of humanistic and scientific thinking did not—as anticipated—create mass defections to the real. On the contrary, the new age of unbelief strengthened the allegiance to realities understood in the form of images. The credence that could no longer be given to realities understood in the form of images was now being given to realities understood to be images, illusions. (1977:153)

When applied to spirit photographs, the proof (reality) lies in the physicality of the photograph itself, rather than the appearance (form) of the image or the content that the image describes. In other words, the object is the reality because it is the result of the technology that does not lie (a camera captures what is present—if a spirit is in the image
it is because a spirit was present), rather than the reality being an interpretation of the image (it looks as if a spirit is in the image leading to the possibility there might be a light leak in this camera, or a contaminated plate). As described by Sontag, the predominant model of thought subscribed to during the “religious and political” illusions of the pre-Enlightenment period—that of looking at objects as metaphors for expanded thought, was considered no longer valid during the mid-to-late 1800s when modern photography and Spiritualism were coming of age. I do not suggest that all of humanity lost the ability to reason during the Spiritualist movement, but rather I offer Sontag’s observations about the change in mindset as a possible influence in the decision of some to accept as truth what many others in the same time period rejected as absurd.

Why were spirit photographs, in so many cases obviously manufactured rather than given by spirit, widely accepted? One tentative conclusion might be that some clients who were photographed with spirit may have willingly accepted the fakery because they were given the results they desired—a visual remembrance of a lost loved one. Spirit photographs serve the same purpose as postmortem photographs in that they are used as cherished talismans in the way Sontag describes the uses of any photograph that represents a “token of absence,” for example, photos of lovers in wallets or framed family images on work desks. Photographs made or used to replace the absent “. . . express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality” (Sontag 1977:16). Sontag’s description of this particular use of photography acts as a mirror to the fundamental Spiritualist philosophy that we remain in contact with a life after that life has seemingly passed; the “magical” is a metaphor for
the supernatural and “to lay claim to another reality” is the resolute belief that spirit lives on after death.

Photographing the supernatural has continued since the first accidental photograph taken by Mumler, adapting to the cultural needs and personal interests of the photographers. Spiritualist photos of floating personifications of spirit dwindled a few years after the end of the Civil War for two reasons: Mumler’s arrest and high profile trial increased awareness in the general public of the possibility of photographic manipulation; and the close of the Civil War meant the end of the war deaths and the advent of healing, reducing the palliative need for such images. Floating spirit images were replaced with graphic photographs of floating tables and horns documented during séances, and ectoplasmic extrusions from mediums bodies. These types of physical manifestation of spirit also lost favor with the Spiritualists after WWII due to the prevalence of fraud exposure. In turn, cameras pointed toward the sky to photograph UFOs and capture light orbs,17 and in another creative discovery by those still searching for physical spirit manifestations, automatic writing jumped from chalk slates to Polaroid film. More now than ever, there are innumerable paranormal and supernatural photographers and investigators, adapting and refining equipment, experimenting with processes, and faking images, providing more evidence that humans are uncommonly attracted to that which we cannot see but suspect may be there anyway. And, yes, it seems we still want proof.
HISTORICAL LILY DALE

Lily Dale, mockingly called “Silly Dale” by some outsiders and affectionately referred to as “The Dale” by residents and intimate visitors, is located sixty miles southwest of Buffalo, New York, and ten miles from the shore of Lake Erie. It is also firmly situated just west of the Finger Lakes region known as the “The Burned Over District,” an analogy that refers to a sweeping “forest fire” of new American religious movements originating from the area (Martin 2005). Lakes and old growth forests surround Lily Dale’s perimeter, emoting a bucolic setting that provides no hint of its involvement in the scandal and fraud associated with the early days of the Spiritualist movement. It is the oldest Spiritualist community in America; however, its history precedes its official founding date by thirty-five years.

Sometime in the year of 1844 and four years prior to the Fox sisters’ Hydesville rappings, William Johnson, a resident of Laona, New York and father of women’s rights proponent Marion Skidmore, invited a Vermont mesmerist, Dr. Moran, to present to a group of people interested in metaphysical studies. Among the gathering was Jeremiah Carter (Figure 16), a gentleman with undisclosed physical ailments that rendered him “feeble,” who hoped to be treated by the visiting doctor. Moran could not stay long enough to help Carter; however, he suggested that the audience attempt to use the techniques he had just demonstrated to help him themselves. In the words of the Lily Dale Assembly 2008 Visitor’s Guide, “The results were startling. Mr. Carter became entranced. An entity to be a Dr. Hedges spoke to the people present—giving messages from spirit and demonstrating the laying on of hands” (Then and Now 2008). The spirit of
Dr. Hedges cured Carter of his ailments and revealed to Carter that he was to be a healer from that point forward. Those who witnessed Carter’s transformation were convinced that communication with other realms of intelligence was valid; they began calling themselves “Spiritualists, Liberals, and Free Thinkers,” and continued to meet regularly, eventually naming themselves The First Spiritualist Society of Laona. Jeremiah Carter continued to be in contact with the spirit world for the remainder of his life and “healed” many through communication with the spirit of Dr. Hedges. Close to thirty years after Jeremiah Carter experienced his first trance state, he was “continuously urged” by spirits to contact William Alden, owner of a lakeside farm, to establish a Spiritualist summer camp on his property. Carter followed through, contacting Alden who agreed with the idea, establishing a camp that remained on his farm until his death, when family members determined that the financial arrangements were no longer in their interest. This change in property circumstance prompted the Spiritualists to incorporate as a stock-holding
entity and purchase a twenty-acre plot adjacent to the Alden farm, establishing the Cassadaga Lake Free Association in 1879, which was the original footprint of the town we know today as Lily Dale\(^9\) (Hersey 1945:8–10). The first meetings held on the new property convened the following summer, in 1880.

Lily Dale expanded to 160 acres (and now includes the original Alden farm) and is home to thirty-five registered Spiritualist mediums who practice mediumship for income, although it is not uncommon for them to give a free message on the street or at a social gathering if spirit decides to come through. Amongst these official Spiritualist mediums live ordinary folks (by their own definition) who also subscribe to the continuity of life after death and the staunch belief in the two-way communication between spirit and the corporeally-bound world. Some have mediumistic gifts but have not chosen to become registered in Lily Dale to practice; others readily admit they do not have personal direct contact with spirit but believe that others certainly do. There are no exceptions to this demographic; the Lily Dale Assembly, the governing body of Lily Dale, owns all the property of the town, leasing the home lots for ninety-nine years to only those who are card-carrying members in a Spiritualist Church and are members in good standing of the Lily Dale Assembly organization. Although this system has kept Lily Dale a relatively poor community, it has also ensured its survival because the Assembly owns the land and therefore controls what can be done with it, avoiding the inevitable breakup if commercial interests or those with adversarial philosophies took ownership.

Shortly after the purchase of land by the Cassadaga Lake Free Association, permanent buildings began to sprout up, the first of which was an auditorium to accommodate 1200 audience members. As previously discussed, Spiritualism is a religion in which women
have historically held a good deal of power and influence, and nowhere was it more evident than in Lily Dale when tent campsites quickly became lots on which permanent homes were built to accommodate children and extended stays; as today, power and influence outside the home did not preclude the traditional female gender role as caretakers of husbands and children. The initial summer homes eventually prompted construction of beautiful Victorian structures with heat, kitchens, and bathroom facilities for yearlong residency (Figure 17).

The intimate relationship between the Women’s Suffrage Movement and Spiritualism that Braude discusses in *Radical Spirits* was played out on the grounds of Lily Dale: Spiritualist and Suffragette Elizabeth Lowe Watson was invited to be the first speaker on

![Figure 17. Victorian houses on Cottage Row in Lily Dale N.Y. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.](image)
the newly purchased property in 1880 and Susan B. Anthony (Figure 18) annually spoke from its stage during Lily Dale’s Annual Women’s Suffrage Day, established in support of the movement. Anthony was informally tied to Lily Dale from a religious aspect as well. She was involved in the early days of the North Collins Progressive Friends, a radical Quaker group that in later days had more Spiritualists members than Quakers and eventually merged into the Spiritualist community in Lily Dale. By the time Anthony arrived in Lily Dale in the 1890s she was greeted by former members of her circle from her Progressive Friends days. Other Suffrage speakers in Lily Dale included Anna

In addition to its strong ties to the Women’s Suffrage Movement, Lily Dale has inextricable connections to Maggie and Katy Fox, their peddler ghost, the cottage where they met, and the mysteries surrounding the tale. Stuart, in her biography of Maggie Fox, mentions an article published in the *Boston Journal* dated November 23, 1904, fifty-six years after Maggie and Katy met the peddler ghost. It reports the discovery of an intact human skeleton in the rubble of a collapsed cellar wall in the Hydesville farmhouse, which by that time had been named the “spook house.” Stuart contributes even more ambiguity when she states, “The bones later disappeared—no one seemed to know how or where—but a tin pack that had been found nearby, typical of those carried by mid-nineteenth-century peddlers, was preserved” (17). In May 1916, nine years after the *Journal* article, Benjamin F. Bartlett, a philanthropic Spiritualist from Pennsylvania, moved the Hydesville farmhouse and all of its contents to Lily Dale where it was installed on the edge of town, next to the Forest Temple where spirit readings were given freely at daily “services” through camp season, a custom still in practice today. The famous medium Floy Cotrell became overseer and resident medium of the Fox cabin where she manifested rappings for visitors, just as the Fox sisters had done in 1848. The cottage burned to the ground in September 1955 due to arson, but the peddler’s tin trunk and the Fox family bible were saved and are on display on the Lily Dale Museum (Figure 19).
Figure 19. Peddler’s tin pack rescued from the Fox Cottage during its burning in 1955. It is now on display in the museum behind a glass case. The pack was removed for this photograph, specifically for this research. Photo Credit: Ron Nagy.

The description of “Summer Camp” is incomplete when considering the Spiritualist activity that took place in the early years in Lily Dale. Expected camp activities were available and well attended, such as swimming at the beach, bowling, and croquette but the most compelling attraction was the dense concentration of Spiritualist practices that permeated the town. All of the supernatural manifestation of spirit that Spiritualists’ typically experimented with was condensed into a remarkably small area and practiced daily for weeks and months. Before 1949, when the Lily Dale Assembly banned all physical manifestation of spirit, daily séances in homes and public venues produced floating horns and ectoplasmic materializations by the hundreds, if not thousands, each
summer. Slates of writing from beyond and white canvases morphing into artful portraits were commonplace, yet still miraculous events. This highly concentrated microcosm of spirit was a treasure chest for paranormal investigators, gifted mediums, casual visitors, mourning relatives, Suffragists, adamant debunkers, and avid believers, the collective of which crossed barriers of class, economics, and celebrity. Lily Dale possessed an ambience of spectacle in which spirit, believer, and investigator thrived.

Possibly the most famous of these visitors whose name we recognize today is Harry Houdini. The story of his visit is one of word of mouth mixed with speculative reasoning mentioned in a handful of publications (most likely originating from the version told in Lily Dale). Houdini does, however, mention in a letter written in July of 1920 to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, his friend and a Spiritualist, “If time permits, I shall go to Lily Dale, and look around at various mediums and their work. I’ll report to you in detail” (Polidoro 2001:53). At the time Houdini wrote this letter to Doyle, he had already exposed several mediums as fakes, resulting in convictions and jail time for the perpetrators. He was quite flamboyant in his exposure, and when left to his own discretion, would leap from the séance circle, shine a flashlight in the medium’s eyes and publicly pronounce his discovery. Most Lily Dale mediums did not live in Lily Dale other than the summer months, so they were well aware of Houdini and his unceremonious debunking routines across the globe. The story told in Lily Dale today makes it clear Houdini’s reputation arrived in town well before he did. According to the Lily Dale Museum director, a current resident was told by her grandmother who lived in Lily Dale at the time of Houdini’s alleged visit, that upon his entry through the gates, news of his arrival spread like wildfire and within minutes every medium in town had
pulled in their “open signs,” slammed down their shades and locked the doors. This version of the story certainly seems plausible, and serves as a possible explanation as to why Houdini’s promised letter to Doyle describing his visit to Lily Dale is not among the collection of their correspondence—he had nothing to tell.

Lily Dale residents repeat the story of Houdini’s visit to town with regularity, often prompted by a photograph of Houdini with Ira Davenport. Davenport and his brother William were world renowned stage performers who conjured disembodied voices and floating iridescent hands while tied up in their “spirit cabinet,” a wooden structure designed especially for their performances after an audience member asked them if they could conjure spirit in the dark with their hands tied (another example of material behavior because the end product was the result of an interaction and request for a specific outcome). According to Houdini, the Davenports very cagily never called their manifestations spirit, nor did they call themselves Spiritualists, in spite of traveling with and being introduced on stage by J. B. Ferguson, a Spiritualist speaker. Spiritualists to this day, however, claim the Davenport brothers as two of the finest mediums who ever lived (Figure 20). Ira shared the secret of getting untied and retied within the spirit cabinet with Houdini who admits to then using the same trick in his own performances (Houdini 1972). By repeatedly telling this story, and most often with pride, the residents show an eagerness to own the controversies surrounding their beliefs as well as the celebrity of Houdini. Since Houdini did not leave with what he wanted, the mediums, and vicariously the current residents, “bested” the celebrity in that they pulled one over on The Great Houdini—he did not get what he came for, to uncover fraud, but went home
empty-handed instead. The mediums’ legacies were preserved, as was that of the town, at least in this instance for they had escaped the escape artist.

Of equal celebrity but on the other side of the debate on Spiritualism was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a staunch Spiritualist whose advocacy took him to several countries to present his views to audiences numbering in the thousands. Doyle lectured and wrote extensively in defense of Spiritualism, spending decades advocating for the movement, including supporting the Fox sisters when claims of fraud were made against them (Cheroux et al. 2004; Leonard 2005, 64-65). An unusual friendship arose between Doyle and Houdini, who remained close friends for several years, openly sharing and discussing
their opposing views on Spiritualism, until a falling out over statements made by Houdini were published in the newspaper, ensuing in a heated argument and breach of communication that lasted until Houdini’s death.

By the 1940s, frauds and swindlers far outnumbered the serious practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1949, the Lily Dale Assembly banned all physical manifestation of spirit inside the town gates in order to protect the serious mediums, the religion, and the town. A private séance or table tipping circle might still be found in Lily Dale, but participants are carefully chosen among friends, ensuring serious-minded, trusted partners.

In the decades following World War II Lily Dale began a slow decline, following the general pattern of the Spiritualist religion itself. The years of spectacle and fraud eroded the numbers of believers, dramatically reducing the visitors to Spiritualist camps, including Lily Dale. Children inherited homes they did not or could not keep up and houses were left vacant and in disrepair. In a smart decision by the Lily Dale Assembly, the deserted homes were reclaimed and sold on the auction block for delinquent lease fees, making the prices so low that it became possible for many to purchase who otherwise could not. Homes must be bought with cash because mortgages are difficult if not impossible to obtain since the Lily Dale Assembly holds title to the underlying land. Delinquent lease fees of a few thousand dollars opened the market to buyers, with some even putting the purchase of their Lily Dale home on their credit card. This system revitalized the town by ensuring the homes were occupied, leaving the buyers with money for improvements, most of whom upgraded the properties significantly.
A diminutive sign on the main highway running through Cassadaga, New York marks Dale Drive, a narrow winding road that leads to Lily Dale (Figure 21). Dale Drive skirts a flat, still lake on the left and frame houses with sweeping front lawns dotted with ancient elegant trees on the right. As the road nears the Lily Dale gates, the trees thicken into woods, giving a sense of descent into a secret space. I drove down Dale Drive towards Lily Dale for the first time at dusk, with a bit of anxiety and excitement swelling in my chest—anxiety because I was going to a town, alone, whose reputation was built on spirits lurking behind every tree and under every tablecloth, and excitement for the exact same reason. I’d read about the incredible energy many people feel upon entering Lily Dale, so I was cautiously anticipating whether I would personally experience anything
of the same nature—a swoosh or a surge or a sense of something as I drove through the gates into town (Figure 22). I didn’t feel a thing as I pulled away from the entrance booth and onto the street it protected—maybe it was the $150 three-week entrance fee I’d just handed to the teenager guarding the gates. I am not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn’t nothing and that’s what I felt—nothing. It was eerily quiet and very green. Trees were dominant, frame homes lined the tiny streets, and little parks sat tucked into odd little spaces. Flower planters gushing with color were haphazardly placed on steps, around street signs, and in windows (Figures 23, 24). As I inched up the street towards Angel House, the bed-and-breakfast that was to be my home during my three-week stay, the silence of the space was palpable. There was not a soul on the street—no casual walkers, or kids on bikes, not a car, a cat, or a dog in sight (Figure 25). Looking back, it
Figure 23. First house seen upon entering town, 2008. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 24. Home with overflowing potted flowers, 2008. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 25. Deserted Lily Dale streets upon my arrival in the summer of 2008. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
was as if I were Houdini reincarnated and all of Lily Dale knew I had come to expose them. As I reflect on this first impression, I am again struck with the silence that greeted me. Lily Dale is not quiet at dusk, especially during the summer season when the streets are animated by tourists and residents taking walks, chatting about the day, planning the next. Maybe the quiet was my interpretation of what others named energy; I was taken over by sleep the first week, deep sleep for ten to twelve hours or longer each night. When I talked to Frank and Shelley Takei about it, the owners of Angel House, they gave me for the first time, a response I came to know as a familiar one from Lily Dale residents. “That’s the Dale,” Frank said flatly. Shelley shrugged and grinned her sweet smile, “Yep, that’s the Dale.”

Lily Dale exudes a unique sense of place. It is cocooned within a forest, ten square blocks of streets that feel more like sidewalks than roads, snuggly resting inside a space cleared just large enough to accommodate the homes and a few public buildings, just large enough so that it doesn’t feel crowded, but rather protected, watched over, and safe. Lily Dale is a walking community, with asphalt streets taken over by pedestrians and golf carts; I found myself resenting the cars that dared drive on them. Victorian and other smaller frame homes are lined up close to each other, each displaying yard and house art that reflect the owners tastes, beliefs, or personalities. Many of the homes are named with a reference to place, the way ranches are named in the west; rather than “Silver River Ranch,” they choose names that exude the atmosphere of the town such as “The Zen Glen” and “Faery Frond House.” Many of the named homes have a room or two available to paying guests during season.
Flowers are so prolific that they seem to grow wild in the pots, cascading over edges and dripping onto the grass. Clotheslines are stretched across yards with flapping towels and shirts, a symbol of the choice of some residents to not use clothes dryers, “The fresh air is better,” one resident told me. As I walked down a street on my first full day in the Dale I passed a table at the lawn’s edge with an umbrella shading mounds of garlic, onions, squash, potatoes, and green beans (Figure 26). Each vegetable pile had a small tag indicating price and in the middle of the table amongst the vegetables sat a plastic coffee can with a slot in the lid and a sign stating: “Pay Here.”

Figure 26. Unattended vegetable stand, 2008. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
The public buildings are old, many of which were built immediately after Lily Dale’s establishment, and include the auditorium, the Assembly Hall, a one room school that is now the museum, the Marion Skidmore Library, the Andrew Jackson Davis Memorial Lyceum, the Sunflower Cafeteria, the Morris Pratt Institute, and a fire station. Places to eat in Lily Dale are limited to the cafeteria, a lunch café, and a coffee shop that serves as the evening entertainment venue; shopping opportunities include three gift shops and a porch-size clothing boutique. Other than the vegetable stand, groceries must be purchased in the larger towns surrounding the Dale. Alcohol is not sold within Lily Dale, nor is it allowed in public places. That does not, however, in any way stop consumption. Since Lily Dale is church owned, the Assembly is careful to keep their tax-exempt status, limiting businesses to as few as they feel justified in having.

The Temples and Readings

Visitors have opportunities to experience spirit and healing through free message, healing, and meditative services offered on the Lily Dale grounds from eight-thirty each morning through nine each evening. Two well-attended daily services are held in the Healing Temple that was built in 1955 to honor the celebrity medium Jack Kelly. Kelly was a close friend and the personal medium of the actress Mae West who came to Lily Dale for the Temple’s grand opening. Volunteer healers and mediums provide a free of charge spiritual healing service every morning and afternoon during season. Art glass lines the walls on either side of the one room structure, and a small organ sits upon the stage. After a very short inspirational message, the congregation files in orderly rows to the front of the room, where ten to twelve healers stand in front of their respective chairs,
awaiting them. Meditative music, often a live organ performance, plays through the
duration of the ceremony. The healers will spend approximately five to ten minutes with
each person, laying on hands (they always ask first) and calling on the wholeness of the
universe to provide the type of healing that the person needs. The atmosphere is quiet,
respectful and calming.

A few hundred yards away is the Temple Forest (Figures 27, 28), an outside stage for public message services. Rows of benches face the platform where mediums, both residents and visiting, provide free message readings every afternoon at four during season. Each medium has a unique method of capturing spirit and delivering message but without exception, they stand at the front of the congregation and single out those who have a spirit available for them by either pointing to the person in the crowd or calling out the name of the spirit they are in contact with. Whoever recognizes the spirit’s name or description raises their hand or calls out to claim the message. The majority of these messages are quite general, with many people present who might identify with the description. For example, a medium might announce, “I have an elderly gentleman with a button-up sweater, beginning to gray, well mostly gray and a little balding around the top. He is coughing, he has a lung problem and I see smoke all around him. Let me see, I’m getting the name Bill or Bob or Brad, some kind of ‘B’ name. Can anyone claim this gentleman?” Often times, several people will claim one spirit and the medium will question them more, and very quickly decide if the spirit is for them. Other times no one claims a spirit and they move on the next spirit waiting to come through.

Private readings are scheduled by walking to a medium’s reading room and signing up for a time slot for that day. A few mediums have a week’s worth of sheets to schedule an
Figure 27. Temple Forest as pictured on a postcard postmarked 1915. From collection of Dr. Eileen McNamara, used with permission.

Figure 28. Forest Temple as it looked in the summer of 2009. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
appointment ahead of time, but most will only book one day at a time. This is for two reasons; first, to reduce the number of people who sign up and then do not show for the appointment, and second, most visitors come for only a day or two so the mediums want to keep their days open to accommodate everyone—if several days of schedules are filled ahead of time, the one and two day visitors would not have an opportunity to meet with the medium. It is important to mediums that they be as equitable as possible when “serving spirit,” the term used to describe their readings and healings.

Leolyn Woods and Inspiration Stump

The Leolyn Woods is part of the original twenty-acre purchase of the Lily Dale property. The entrance to the old growth forest (Figure 29) sits on a far corner of town next to the current day campground. Winding footpaths through the woods lead to Inspiration Stump (Figures 30, 31), the remains of a tree that was felled prior to the 1879 land purchase. It measures approximately three feet across and has been reinforced and modified so often that it is now entirely concrete including the ascending steps; it is surrounded by a fence. Because it and the immediately adjacent area is believed to have extraordinary energy, mediums have used Inspiration Stump as a gathering place for over 140 years to give free spirit messages several times a day throughout the summer camp months to accepting Spiritualists and visitors, in the same manner as at the Forest Temple. The ashes of long-dead Lily Dale mediums are rumored to be buried in the ground surrounding the Stump. Stories are told of cold weather and ice forcing ash urns to snap up out of the ground during harsher winters, resulting in the need to pave the area with stepping-stones bearing the engraved names of the early Lily Dale mediums. The
truth of this remains unclear to me. Assembly members deny the burials, but other residents claim it is true and that the Assembly members are holding back the information for reasons unknown. Whether ashes of mediums lie below the stones or not, the long litany of Spiritualist mediums’ names engraved on them represent the volume of those who stood upon the stump to bring forth spirit, lending an air of reverence to the area. Weekly ghost tours through the town end with a midnight walk through the old growth Leolyn Woods to Inspiration Stump where many tour guests, at the prompting of the ghost tour guides, see visions of ancient Native Americans, Civil War soldiers, and other spirits who happen to be present at the time. It is also a favorite place to photograph orbs because of the alleged high spirit activity.
Figure 30. Inspiration Stump sometime prior to 1899, exact date unknown. Permission of Lily Dale Assembly.

Figure 31. Inspiration Stump in the Leolyn Woods in 2009. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
The Pet Cemetery

The Pet Cemetery,\textsuperscript{24} tucked just beyond the main entrance of the Loelyn Woods, is the final resting place for well over a hundred Lily Dale pets (Figure 32). The cemetery’s original grave allegedly entombs a horse; however, controversy exists today as to what horse is actually buried there, if any at all. The grave marker on the burial site describes the unfortunate horse as Topsy, a beloved Lily Dale work animal, who fell through the ice and drowned while harvesting ice from the lake in the days before refrigeration (Figure 33). This story raises the ire of the Lily Dale museum director, Ron Nagy, who adamantly and passionately views it as flat out wrong; his reasoning is based on a local newspaper article from 1900 that describes an incident in which a team of horses

Figure 32. Lily Dale Pet Cemetery. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
belonging to an ice harvesting company fall through the ice on a Lily Dale lake, and because they are weighted down by their harnesses, are pulled under the ice and drowned before they can be rescued (Nagy 2008b). A third perspective appears when some lifelong Lily Dale residents are surprised to hear that any horse at all is buried in the cemetery. The debate over the actual circumstances of the dead horse speaks to the questions of perceived truth in historical documents versus legend and the importance of both in framing identity of place. Anyone who has ever been interviewed for a newspaper article knows that the press often gets it wrong. Yet those who research and strive to know the details of a situation in order to understand the present often use newspapers for fact gathering. From the perspective of Nagy, the news holds “the absolute truth,” and in this case, matches the local legend just enough that he refuses to even consider my suggestion that there might have been three dead horses. He believes the newspaper
because everyone from the time period is dead, so in the absence of verification, the newspapers are unequivocal. The Lily Dale Assembly has not made a move to correct the gravesite marker, indicating that the local legend holds more credibility within the community because it comes from the community itself rather than an outsider (the newspaper), and may be a more accurate representation of the way the community chooses to identify itself.

From a folklorist’s point of view the exact historical knowledge is not important, but rather the circumstances and how they are handled become more relevant factors in that they help us understand a community and its culture. Burial of a dead horse as the instigation for a pet cemetery gives evidence of Lily Dale’s commitment to their fundamental belief system—the continuity of all life, the connection to the earth of all living things, and the respect the spirit realm demands regardless of the physical form exhibited on earth. The pet cemetery embodiment of these Spiritualist concepts is even more evident in the grave markings for the passed pets. The burial sites are all very small, with the exception of the original horse gravesite, with grave marker styles ranging from child-made painted plaques to professionally engraved granite head stones which bear a remarkable resemblance to those found in human cemeteries. A large portion of the markers are poured concrete with the pet’s name lettered with a stick by the pet’s owner or are innovative objects that reflect the owner’s feelings towards the pet, such as a painted stick or wooden tulips. Many are decorated with multiple items from the family, each member creating a personal tribute to the pet (Figures 34–37). The Pet Cemetery feels as reverent and reflective as any human cemetery, and in some respects holds
Figure 34 Homemade pet grave headstone in Lily Dale Pet Cemetery. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 35. Pet grave marker with water bowl and butterflies. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
Figure 36. Wooden cross pet grave marker. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 37. Three pet grave markers. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
more of an impact because of the closeness of the graves to each other and the intensity
in which the homemade messages are written. In this way, it resembles the denseness of
graves and written reflections of grief in “Babyland,” the designated area in the Logan,
Utah, cemetery reserved for infants and children, created to ease the economic burden of
grieving parents. A comparison of a pet cemetery to a children’s cemetery may seem
inappropriate to some, and I am not suggesting that the grief is equivalent because there
is no comparison—parental bereavement following the loss of a child is of a magnitude
that surpasses any other loss through death (Rando 1986:6). However, in the context of
Lily Dale’s belief system (that all life is precious and connected to a universal entity) the
similarities in the way societies represent the grief in losing a cherished life holds merit.
An example of this can be shown in an observation I made during the summer of 2008,
when I first discovered the Pet Cemetery. The setting sun was radiating a magnificent
“sweet light” when I first entered the grave area, which was engulfed in dappled
sunbeams, lush with green ferns, and gnarly old-growth trees. About thirty feet down the
path was a pet grave marked off by a double set of broken tree limbs outlining a two-foot
square area on the forest floor. Towards the far top of the cordoned-off square was a rock
approximately eight inches wide by five inches tall, almost obscured by a large weed; at
the near end of the space, a red-painted tree branch protruded upright about a foot from
the ground (Figure 38a). I was very taken by the symmetry and careful placement of the
rock and branch, particularly the bright red color, so I took three pictures for my
collection, each from a different angle and distance. Upon my return two days later, it
had changed. The weeds had been pulled, revealing the rock, which now had a bright
blue wooden sign with silver lettering that read “Kelsey 1991–2008” propped against it—
the bright red branch was gone (Figure 38b). It appeared that the original grave marking had been placed with thought, time, and deep caring until a more permanent marker could be made, so much so that I had mistaken it for the final memorial. Temporary pet markers created with such care give further evidence of the Lily Dale psyche regarding the afterlife of all earthly lives, whether human or not, and demonstrate the same intent reflected in the burial of Topsy, so long ago that the facts have blurred.

Figure 38 a,b.
Same pet grave two days apart.
Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
The Fairy Trail

The opposite corner of Lily Dale holds a more recently developed “magical” forest, The Woodland Forest and Fairy Trail (Figure 39), where hundreds of miniature bits of fairy culture are scattered throughout the woodscape. The fairy celebrated in the Fairy Trail is entirely Walt Disney in nature, an observation confirmed by a sign near the entryway featuring the image of Disney’s Tinkerbell welcoming visitors to the trail. Nowhere is there indication of European or New World fairylore tradition in which liminal or supernatural beings prey upon humans in an attempt to mislead or cause
mischief. The Fairy Trail was created to give children a special place within the woods to care for and maintain an area that had been desecrated years earlier by the cutting of this section of the old growth forest, with the added benefit of creating another free experience for visitors to town. Fairy houses made of tree bark and strands of shiny glass beads rest on the forest floor next to upside-down plastic butter tubs covered with moss and seashells and tiny doorways cut through their sides. A low hanging branch supports a four-inch long swing holding a grinning elf; a wind chime hangs still in an adjacent tree. The trees and grounds are sprinkled with homes for, tributes to, and playthings of everything fairy, most of which are created during Children’s Week, the seven days during the summer camp season dedicated to children’s classes and workshops related to Spiritualist practices. The children’s fairy collection expands when other visitors add their own whimsical fairy artifacts throughout the remainder of the summer (Figures 40-43).

Figure 40. Fairy house in Lily Dale Fairy Trail. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
Figure 41. Sampling of fairy houses in Fairy Trail. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 42. Sampling of fairy houses in Fairy Trail. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
These objects created to celebrate the commercial American fairy viewpoint serve purposes beyond the aesthetic; children and adults who create the objects exhibit an example of material behavior described by Jones as the crux of understanding material objects: a behavior in which the thought and action involved in the construction of an object reveals personality, attitudes, values, intentions, and motivations of the creator (1997). The Fairy Trail, created with the conscious intention of providing activities and a reserved space for children, also exhibits a possible unrecognized motivation by its founders and subsequent supporters to foster belief in the supernatural in a manner that is more accessible to a child than the more obscure concept of an afterlife. Children are immersed in commercial fairydom through their associations with the tooth fairy and pop
culture cartoons, and it is within that construct that they understand the supernatural creatures called fairies. They bring this understanding to the larger stage of Lily Dale, transitioning their already comfortable perceptions to include a broader view of the supernatural, anchoring physical activity, the creation of a house or toy, with the invisible fairies, the same way they leave their physical tooth under their pillow for the tooth fairy. This is very similar to the materialization of spirit in the days when ectoplasm, tipping tables, and spirit photography gave physical presence to the invisible in that the object, whether a tooth or a floating trumpet, represents presumption of an expanded supernatural presence much beyond the symbolic object to a presence that is not seen with the physical eyes, the tooth fairy or the spirit of a dead relative. The belief in the invisible entities (tooth fairy and trumpet spirit) drives the action of the physical, that is the placing of a tooth under the pillow and floating trumpets at a séance, and is therefore a material behavior. The activities of the mediums were done with the intent of producing an object that represented their beliefs and philosophies, the sum of which has been and is viewed by Spiritualists in a positive redemptive light.

Most adult residents in Lily Dale do not hold a literal fairy belief, but rather view the Fairy Trail as a place to enjoy nature and play with fantasy if one chooses, while visitors to Lily Dale are more likely to search for something out of the ordinary to occur there. Visitors look for the unusual in every place they go in Lily Dale, and it is in fact the reason many of them visit. The Fairy Trail provides another location in which magical events might occur, and therefore another opportunity to experience supernatural phenomenon less available at home. Whether a belief in fairies is present or not, the act
of placing a fairy object in the woods is material behavior in that it is done in the context of creating or in response to the physical world, regardless of specific intent.

The Fairy Trail, like the Pet Cemetery, has a small controversy in that at least one resident opposes its presence. He explained to me that “fairies have no business in Lily Dale—they have nothing to do with Spiritualism.” This resident was born in Lily Dale and remains there into midlife. He has very distinct and strong feelings about the town and the religion, showing an unusual (for Lily Dale) inflexibility regarding the choices of metaphysical theories practiced by others, even if done in play as in the Fairy Trail. I suspect he is uncomfortable because his identity with Spiritualism, the inherent reason for the town’s existence, is being contaminated with something he does not consider relevant, and in fact is a distraction to the mission of the community which is to facilitate contact and communication with the dead. Since Lily Dale is a Spiritualist community, the presence of fairies, real or imagined, in his view dilutes the power of the community and diminishes its effectiveness, turning the town into a tourist attraction rather than a place to practice belief and engage in religious experiences. Although I spoke with no one else who felt so strongly about the Fairy Trail, there is a general sense among the people who grew up in Lily Dale that the good days are gone, and in order to survive changes have had to be made to remain economically stable, which singularly translates into increased summer visitors. A wistful longing for times past comes through in some of the interviews, a situation that is not unique to Lily Dale but is ubiquitous in memories of earlier days everywhere.

A comparison of the three forest areas (Inspiration Stump, The Pet Cemetery, and the Fairy Trail) show the multiple ways material behavior has created dramatically different
spaces in the same forest. These forest areas, in reality one large unit encircling the town, are similar in that the trails are unpaved foot worn paths through the woods, but the human uses of the spaces spur different reactions because of the intent of the material behavior used to create them. At Inspiration Stump mediums hold services in which their behavior is a reflection of their “attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and motivations” (Jones 1997) to contact the spirits of dead relatives for those searching for evidence of an afterlife. In a like manner, those who attend the services understand that the activity is the core of the Spiritualist religious doctrine, and whether they are believers or not, treat the space as hallowed ground and with respect, as they might in a physical church building. The space surrounding Inspiration Stump demands quiet respect at all times and holds a sense of spirituality, even when services are long over, because the behavior in the space is a result of the intent, attitudes, and expectations of both the medium and the attendees. The Fairy Trail reflects a magical sense of being watched by the invisible with positive, protective overtones. The thousands of tiny structures, statuary, and other objects created with whimsy and fantasy reflect the light-hearted attitude of those who made them. They may also be evidence of a flexible belief system in which adults creatively engage children’s understanding of the supernatural in pop culture as a means to situate the more expanded view of Spiritualism through a material demonstration of accepted pop culture elements. The Fairy Trail may represent material behavior by adults who created the space and initiated the building of fairy houses for purposes of reinforcement of supernatural beliefs, whether conscious or unconscious. Material behavior is certainly exhibited by the children and other visitors who make the artifacts as a reflection of their “attitudes, beliefs, intentions and motivation,” much of which may be pure fantasy and
whimsical fun. The Pet Cemetery, in contrast, emits an ambience of human emotion related to loss and a belief that death does not mean gone. The grave markers and sentiments left for the pets are physical objects that reflect the emotions, intent, and possibly even the economic state of their makers. The actions and intentions of those who perform and create in each of the forest areas influence the physical environment, and that environment, in turn, influences behavior within it. In addition, the behaviors within and the functions of each forest area give evidence of the openness of residents to accept a variety of practices and theories related to spirit and supernatural phenomenon even when it does not include a direct relationship to Spiritualism, such as fairy culture, not a surprising observation considering the history of the religion as an unorthodox and accepting belief system.

The Maplewood Hotel

The Maplewood Hotel (Figure 44), the only hotel within the Lily Dale gates, is situated in the middle of town surrounded by most of the public social venues in Lily Dale: the lakes, coffee shop, meeting hall, and lunch café. The hotel lobby looks much as it did decades earlier, with a paper and pencil check-in system and keys to rooms kept behind the main desk on wall hooks (Figure 45). Hotel guests must leave the key to their room with the desk clerk when they leave the hotel and then pick it up again upon returning. The simple announcement, “I’m in room 6,” will result in the clerk on duty handing over the key to the room. A large sign in the main entrance area clearly notifies guests that séances are not allowed in the hotel lobby. Adjoining the main entrance lobby is another large sitting room with walls displaying spirit paintings created through the mediumship
Figure 44. Maplewood Hotel in Lily Dale, NY. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 45. Maplewood Hotel front lobby. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
of the Bangs Sisters and the Campbell Brothers, including an image of President Abraham Lincoln made by the Campbell Brothers (Figure 11). At center stage on the main wall of the parlor hang two hand embroidered velvet curtains displayed behind glass, created by Molly Fancher, “an instrument for spirit” who produced detailed handiwork and wrote thousands of letters while paralyzed and in trance for nine years (Figures 46 a,b). 26 On the opposite wall, an extremely large spirit painting of Azur, the spirit guide who inspired the precipitated paintings done by Campbell Brothers, stares into the room (Figure 47). These two larger-than-life examples of “spirit at work in the world” looming over the room proper create an ambiance in the parlor that suggests one is never alone in the room, even when no other human being is present.

Figure 46 a,b. Embroidered curtains done by Molly Fancher while under trance. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
The Maplewood is purported to have several haunted rooms, a few of which returning guests refuse to accept upon subsequent check-ins. A hotel manager told me the story of a guest frantically darting out of a first floor room in the middle of the night announcing that she had been sexually abducted in her bed by aliens and insisting she immediately be given another room. Ron Nagy, the museum director, batted at the air as he spoke of experiencing a feeling of walking through cold, wet cobwebs upon entering one of the rooms. Many similar stories are shared among guests and residents gathering on the hotel front porch, the time-honored location for round-the-clock socializing. The porch is lined with wooden rocking chairs where visitors congregate to share new and past experiences,
discuss spirit philosophies interspersed with UFO evidence, and make future plans to meet up with new-found friends (Figure 48).

The Maplewood is one of the more interesting buildings in town because of its origins. Originally a horse barn, the entire structure was elevated in 1880, and an additional floor was built underneath the first, creating a two story building. This process was repeated in 1886 culminating in a 4-story hotel with the original horse barn as the top floor reinvented as medium reading rooms. I was told by one of the managers that in a handful of guest rooms on the third floor, occupants hear the sound of horse hoofs from the floor above throughout the night, in spite of the fact that the fourth floor has been unused for many years.

Figure 48. Maplewood Hotel front porch. Photo Credit M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
Since no one had been on the fourth floor of the Maplewood in a very long time, I felt fortunate to be granted permission to see and photograph it, in spite of the warning, “Well, you know it’s a stable, it stinks up there.” Accompanied by a hotel manager and a maintenance person, I trudged up the back service stairs to the fourth floor entrance—a locked door in the ceiling resembling an attic portal. An overpowering wave of hot July air enveloped us as we ascended through the opening and onto the fourth floor proper. At the top of the stairs the left wall had the date “1888” scrawled in large penciled letters in several locations where the wallpaper had fallen down; an old Yankees baseball cap hung from the baluster. The overall layout mimicked the other floors with two long hallways arranged in a T-formation; the unique feature of the fourth floor was the individual tiny rooms off either side of the hallways, each marked with a number on the top of the doorframe and peeling floral wallpaper within. The rooms were the size of the original horse stalls, suggesting that the barn structure was preserved when first renovated as a hotel, and were of the size to accommodate only a couple of chairs and a medium’s table. Dozens of these rooms indicate the large number of active mediums practicing from 1880 and into the new century who needed space to give private messages and séances (Figures 49–51).

Figure 49. Room number over 4th floor doorway in Maplewood Hotel. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
Figure 50. Fourth floor of the Maplewood Hotel at top of stairs. Photo Credit M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 51. Hallway on fourth floor of Maplewood Hotel. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
The Lily Dale Museum

Nowhere in town does talk of Spiritualism directly related to Lily Dale appear as predominantly as it does in the Lily Dale Museum, once a one-room school house for the town’s children (Figure 52). In this tiny, moderately maintained structure resides the physical record of the history of Lily Dale and significant artifacts of Spiritualism’s history. It holds a collection of photographs and documents relating to the Women’s Suffrage Movement, along with hundreds of historic photographs, spirit paintings, slate writings, newspapers, town documents, and Lily Dale memorabilia, much of which predates the official founding of the town in 1879. Over twenty slate boards with chalk writings and drawings from spirit from the early 1900s, including one purportedly signed by Abraham Lincoln’s spirit, are neatly lined up in rows in a case also housing a collection of Ouiji boards. Along each wall sit vintage display cases holding a variety of relics including the Fox family bible and the peddler’s tin trunk that were saved from the burning Fox cottage. Postcards, donated personal photo albums, books, and old newspapers are available for visitors to peruse. Upon entering the museum, visitors are bombarded with Spiritualist history, most of which has to do with the spirit manifestations of the earliest days of Lily Dale and the Spiritualist movement. (Figure 53).

It was within the museum that I began my field research in Lily Dale with Ron Nagy, the museum director, and subsequently met with many visitors who came to view objects representing the physical history of the town, much of which is evidential materialization of spirit from before the 1940s ban on the practices. Throughout the course of my time in Lily Dale, the museum was the site for interviews, hours of research and general
Figure 52. Lily Dale Museum, once a one-room schoolhouse for the children of the area. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.

Figure 53. Lily Dale Museum. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
discussions with Nagy regarding his attitudes and experiences in Lily Dale. Much of my understanding of Lily Dale came through Nagy’s help in identifying writings, historical documents, photographs, and a variety of physical artifacts that served as the initiators for discussion regarding the culture and beliefs of Spiritualists, the town’s residents, and Lily Dale’s historical past.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Historical information about Lily Dale was obtained prior to my visit through a variety of reading materials written by both scholars and journalists, and was supplemented by hours spent in the Lily Dale museum studying documents and artifacts along with discussions with museum director Ron Nagy and other town residents. Field research included a combination of casual discussions with visitors and residents along with a more formal activity of recorded interviews with residents willing to share their experiences of life in Lily Dale through their personal photographs.

My collection method of using personal photographs to resurrect memories of ordinary town residents serves three purposes. First, it demonstrates the use of folk material culture (personal photos) as a useful tool in and of itself in the field. Second, this data collection technique is an example of material behavior in the storytelling model in that the object (the photograph), although seemingly the focal point of the exercise, is nothing more than a physical object around which an interaction takes place between the listener (me as the interviewer) and the storyteller (the residents telling their memory) as described by Jones in his material behavior comparison to Georges’ storytelling outline (1997). The third significant reason for using photographs to collect data is that it supports my proposal that the use of undervalued personal photographs represents one of the multiple mechanisms that can trigger manifestations of identity assignment (Burke, 2000) and may subsequently reveal individual and group identities that will be either lost, or at very best minimized, without their use. These images are considered of minimal value in the eyes of the public as well as their owners, yet, when viewed, spark a
memory that reaffirms their individual identity as well as their connection to the community. In the case of Lily Dale, a town known for spectacle, the ordinary photos and memories of citizens not directly related to the notoriety provide a deeper understanding and more accurate depiction of the Spiritualists who live there today.

The township of Lily Dale is privately owned by the Lily Dale Assembly, making it necessary to obtain permission to conduct research within its gates. Although this was a longer process than I originally anticipated (approximately 9 months), having official approval to interview and photograph provided me a “stamp of approval,” a credibility when requesting interviews, opening doors that would otherwise have remained shut. Most residents were quite willing to speak with me knowing I had Assembly approval and Nagy, the museum director and representative of the assembly, was able to comfortably become an ally in my research. He proved to be a fountain of valuable information and support. Two residents I approached to participate remained aloof for reasons that had nothing to do with official clearance, but for personal fears of exposure as a result of previously published materials about fellow residents and in one instance, fatigue of visitors putting the town “under the microscope.”

Numerous scholars, artists, and journalists have researched Lily Dale since it was first founded over 125 years ago. Without exception, the investigations and studies have at their center spirits and the mediums who invoke their presence. This is, after all, the very reason for Lily Dale’s existence—it is not a surprise that the focus has been on the supernatural aspects of the community and those mediums credited with making the phenomenon occur. The notorious reputation of Lily Dale interests me as well, but not for its larger-than life spirit spectacles or famous mediums, but rather because of the shadow
the celebrity casts over the visual and narrative treasures of the individual residents who do not play a starring role in that celebrity. This shift in focus from the famous to the ordinary caused unexpected confusion when I searched for participants in my research, making explanation of my project and requesting participation more difficult tasks than I originally expected.

The target participants for my research were persons who did not have any particular talent for mediumship, yet were personally invested in Lily Dale through their beliefs, experiences, and commitment to the town, and who were willing to share their personal photographs and record their narratives about the memories the images resurrected. Often, the first reaction I received when I approached potential contributors was one of surprise that I was asking them to participate because they did not have extraordinary mediumship ability, did not have spirits appearing in their photographs, or had never been asked to be interviewed prior to my request (there were a few exceptions to this characterization). In short many, although not all, did not feel their images or their memories would add value to the greater record of Lily Dale. Some were confused as to why I would want to research anything other than spirit in Lily Dale—I could research non-spirit topics anywhere. After convincing them that their photographs and their memories were exactly what I was hoping to find, most agreed to participate. There were three instances in which the participants did not understand the importance of the photographic connection and did not have images available or chose to use the photographs of others. This might be further proof they did not consider their own images or memories valuable, or that I did not satisfactorily position the importance of personal photography to them. In the end, it was inconsequential in light of the personal narratives
they shared with me using other visual artifacts; additionally, they served as a comparison for those who did share personal snapshots regarding the types and style of memories that were revealed.

It was important to me that my contributors were willing participants and felt at ease with my project and me before I proceeded. My main contacts in Lily Dale, Shelley and Frank Takei, jump-started my fieldwork by providing the names of people who they felt would be receptive to my research requests. This was an important element in becoming productive immediately because interviewing is sensitive in Lily Dale, as in all communities, but in this case for some very specific reasons related to the town itself. Students, writers, filmmakers, and reporters are regularly asking to interview residents, with mediums being prime targets for research, causing an understandable level of interview fatigue to set in. Because my research was not targeted towards mediums, I did not seek them out; however, interviews with two mediums, due to circumstances of time and place, are included in my collection data. One resident was hesitant to speak with any outsiders who plan to write because he felt betrayed by the manner in which the town was portrayed in the best-selling book about Lily Dale entitled *Lily Dale: The Town That Talks to the Dead* by Christine Wicker; he mentioned feeling resentful of her sometimes flippant treatment of their beliefs, as well as her unflattering descriptions of physical appearances—nobody wants to be called out for being frumpy and overweight in a best-selling book. Another resident felt it necessary to protect his privacy for fear that Lily Dale’s popularity increased the possibility of their personal life being made public. The Takeis helped me side-step most residents with these general attitudes, so the few
exceptions to cooperation that I mention here most likely represent a larger portion of the community than I was exposed to.

In addition to the Takeis, several other residents were helpful in identifying those who were open to researchers, and in some circumstances made the initial contact to determine residents’ feelings, eliminating an unsolicited request from me. Others gave me names and contact information of friends or neighbors they knew to be receptive. Suggestions even came at the end of interviews from those who had shared their images, an especially gratifying feeling knowing they felt comfortable with the process and that the experience was beneficial for them as well as for me.

This method of identification proved effective in that it provided participants with varied backgrounds, education, and years of residency in Lily Dale. Of the contributors interviewed, male and female were equally represented; some grew up in Lily Dale, others came as teenagers or adults; some were initially introduced to Lily Dale by a spouse or chose to live there after decades of summer visits. The education of the group ranged from high school completion through doctorate degrees; resident status included both year-round and summer residents. Multiple professions were represented in college professors, business owners, various therapists, Lily Dale Assembly employees, those holding jobs outside of Lily Dale, and retirees launching second careers. The types of photographs my subjects chose to use also varied: some had their own photographs, one preferred to use snapshots in donated albums in the museum, and another chose to look at only one or two photographs, yet was able to speak for over an hour regarding his memories, although these did not have the amount of personal element I sought for this study.
My expectations about the types and volume of photographs I would find proved to be inaccurate; I expected photo albums and boxes of old photographs to be much more abundant than they were in light of a casual statement made a year earlier by Wicker regarding their proliferation (a comment she does not remember making). One obvious reason for the low volume of personal photographs is that a very large number of residents consider Lily Dale a summer home; they would not keep their more precious family visual records in a cottage they only occupied three months out of the year. This explains why two of my sessions are completed with albums of photographs taken during house renovations. Since the photos belonged to the house and its transformation, it is logical that these albums would remain in the home, even if it were only occupied in the summer months. I suspect another reason personal snapshots were not as available as expected is that residents, although they may have had some images, were reluctant to pull them out for an outsider to see. They might have been in an unorganized condition, and although that condition was the very thing I expressed the most interest in utilizing in recalling memories, it might have been a leap of faith on their part to let me into the inner circle of their personal chaos. A third reason might support one of the suspected outcomes of this research, and that is they did not consider their images important so they either did not keep them or did not identify them as images worthy to discuss. Not unlike Annette Kuhn’s suggestion in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* that the missing memories shape a narrative (2002:2), so did these missing photographs shape my project. In cases when participants were eager to contribute but did not make photographs available, we used an alternative visual stimulus, which proved effective in gathering information but not necessarily the personal memories I was targeting.
As for my own photographic work, my fieldwork data includes over 400 digital copies of the photographs belonging to residents, accompanied by over twenty hours of digitally recorded associated memories, and over 1800 photographs I made of the town and its residents. The residents’ snapshots I collected exist as a result of many decades of technical advances in photography. The development of hand held 35mm cameras, instant cameras, disposable digital cameras, and now mobile phone cameras allows us to photograph ourselves, our friends and families, our actions and activities, and our surroundings with a button push. We embrace photography as a means for storytelling and memory preservation; but sometimes the original motivation for taking the photograph diminishes—the photo, and along with it the memory, gets tossed into a box and forgotten. This happens in two ways in Lilypad. First, the photographers’ intent cannot be surmised in the oldest images found hanging on the walls in the museum, most of which were rescued by Ron Nagy, the current museum director, and his predecessor Joyce LaJudice, who founded the museum and who painstakingly and single-handedly preserved much of Lilypad’s documents and historical anecdotal information. With the photographer’s intent lost or not obvious, current residents who look at the old images are empowered to put their own memories over them, virtually recreating the image at the same time the memory is resurrected. This situation will be seen in my discussion of the session with Jana Potter, when she views two old images, one of the old train station taken long before her time and the other of a building that still stands in town, repurposed from its function during the period the image was taken. A second way in which the photographer’s intent in making an image is lost manifests itself in a very particular way in Lilypad because spirit and metaphysical phenomenon dominate the conversation
surrounding photography; this can create an undervalued perception of ordinary snapshots, making them drop into a more obscure status. This is demonstrated in the comments made by potential contributors to the project when they remarked that their images did not have spirit in them, so therefore they were not worth looking at. In the context of this project, those who pulled out those snapshots and spoke about their memories reaffirmed their connections to Lily Dale with their own experiences as primary events; whether the incident included spirit is immaterial because the memories belonged to them first and Lily Dale second, rather than the more typical reverse, reinforcing their place within the larger community and ultimately revealing a more intimate view of Lily Dale and today’s Spiritualists.
Extensive discussion has taken place regarding photography and memory, establishing it as a known and accepted way to provoke recollections of people, places, and activities, although the veracity of those memories has often been questioned. Nancy Martha West discusses the onset of personal photography and Kodak’s role in shaping the memories of our past through the use of snapshots in *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*. She states, “Modern culture has come to regard the isolated moments represented by the photographs as producing collective truth when in fact they represent at best only relative truths and their sheer proliferation negates meaning rather than helps construct it” (2000:3). West uses Sontag’s argument that the sheer volume of photographs and the snippets of truth they impart have conditioned us to embrace an incomplete truth as an end (Sontag 1977:106). West interprets this to mean “we have learned to accept the partial truths offered by photographs as standing in for an understanding of the world itself (or on a smaller scale, for an understanding of our own individual lives and histories)” (3). This may be a valid argument when looking at modern societies at large, but let’s examine what happens on an individual basis, and in particular, how the residents of Lily Dale construct the past when viewing their photographs. Any photograph is partial fact; however, it is often enough truth to initiate a thought that invokes a chain of memories of events in which identity can be solidified or emerge more firmly intact. Sontag reveals how this happens when she states, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like
knowledge—and, therefore, like power” (4). The same knowledge and power are transferred to the viewer of a photograph when they become privy to what the image reveals and interpret it to their own sensibilities. Although the photograph represents only a moment in time and therefore is an incomplete representation of circumstance, the knowledge (power) that Sontag refers to is the conduit from which memories flow.

Annette Kuhn substantiates the validity of incomplete memory narratives in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* in a discussion of the importance of sharing past experiences as a “key moment in the making of ourselves” and that elements of the memory not verbalized or forgotten are often just as important in shaping identity as actual details of experiences that are shared (2002:2). In support of Kuhn’s suggestion that forgotten experiences, both those never remembered or willingly repressed, are a benefit in constructing a self-identity is the idea from Friedrich Nietzsche, the existential philosopher, who wrote over a century ago that happiness is the result of one’s ability to selectively forget the past (Rossington and Whitehead 2007:103). In most cases what is forgotten or omitted are the unpleasant, even tragic moments, in a lifetime. The ability to selectively choose which memories are shared and which are ignored enables parents who have lost children to eventually put their shattered life back together and claim a small piece of happiness in their own assessment of their lives. In a similar manner, the ability to eventually ignore their memories of the gruesome experiences of war allows veterans to piece together a life with family members who know nothing of their pain. I am not suggesting that painful and tragic experiences be repressed or that many do not rightfully mourn from the aftermath of tragedy, but that omitting painful experiences, or selectively choosing not to share unpleasant memories is a mechanism by which an
identity of happiness can be constructed from the fragments of experience as described by Kuhn. It is the act of remembering and retelling a life experience, whether factual or fiction, complete or partial, that enables a memory to become a fragment of the present (Kuhn 2002:4). The present is where identities are realized and it is within this context that the memories of the Lily Dale contributors reveal, confirm, and reconstruct their personal identities as individuals and as members of the Lily Dale community.

The recollections shared by the Lily Dale contributors fell into the categories of pleasant, happy, comical, ironic, and some unpleasant. Any troublesome memory, and there were few, was couched in either an expression of relief that the situation was over or spoken of as a memory only and not part of the present. Most memories were of their own lives and therefore could be considered part of their life narrative, if it were even possible to construct a life narrative that is complete, which it is not. A small snippet of a memory gives only an interpretation of a moment in one person’s life; however, Kuhn suggests that identity is made up of many fragmented pieces of memory, both as individuals and as group members (Kuhn 2002: 4). Lily Dale residents, in recalling some of the elements that make up their past experiences, reestablish those identities, regardless of the partial nature of the memory. In my collected research, this becomes apparent in the stories told, the manner in which they are told, the lengthy interviews, and the reactions of the participants at the conclusion of the sessions.

Although most narratives recorded focused on unique experiences of the contributor, as a whole the collection speaks to the group identity of the community in an unexpected way in that the participants nonchalantly place spirit experiences alongside those that do not touch the spirit realm. When the memories involve spirit activity, they are spoken of
in a casual manner, woven into the narrative as just another part of the story. The existence of the spirit realm permeates Lily Dale and is engrained in the culture of the town and its residents every bit as much as the forests and lakes which surround it. Spirit is intertwined in Lily Dale’s history, present, and future. A spirit encounter is not a surprise event to be singled out and discussed as an isolated occurrence, but is regularly regarded as an everyday happening. This holds true of spirit experiences the Spiritualists have outside of Lily Dale as well. Outsiders perceive Lily Dale and spirit existence as the odd event, a separate and distinct topic, while residents speak of it with a serene, respectful demeanor; spirit is enmeshed in the Spiritualist understanding of the universe, and is therefore ubiquitous in daily life. Residents of Lily Dale explain that those who do not know or see the evidence of spirit are not looking for it, and in fact, may be ignoring it.

Raised In Lily Dale

Constant spirit presence is well illustrated in my session with Sara Chetkin, a woman in her mid-to-late twenties, who grew up in Lily Dale, and like all other children raised in Lily Dale, was born with spirit an ever-present element of her universe. Chetkin, an acupuncturist and energy healer, no longer lives in Lily Dale but visits as often as she is able. She is the first contributor to record her memories with me upon my arrival in Lily Dale, and her two disorganized boxes of photographs are exactly what I expected based on Wicker’s observation of photographs stashed in “boxes and bureau drawers” in the town. I help Chetkin drag up a blue rubber tub and a large cardboard box (Figure 54) from her mother’s basement. Both are filled to the brim with loose snapshots and photo
lab envelopes. We sit on the back deck of the house that overlooks the forest, comfortably situated in the shade of the pine trees that creep up to the property (Figure 55). She slowly works her way through images, often commenting that a lot of them belong to her much older brothers and sisters, that she doesn’t remember any of the incidences or people in the photos. The photographs seem to be a mixed up tangle of the lives of the entire family, a metaphor for the experience of family life itself. She continues to dig through the boxes, pushing aside stacks of images she assumes will not resonate with her. Eventually she makes her way to a section of photos that are of her lifetime: images of grandparents’ birthdays, Thanksgiving dinners with extended family, collecting sap from trees for maple syrup, and toddler images of herself. As she looks at an image of childhood friends, she begins to talk about the energy games they practiced
at Lily Dale’s Sunday Lyceum classes that carried over to regular practice at home with her mother. She describes the scene in which she and the other children regularly stood at opposite ends of her mother’s back deck facing each other. One child held two stationary dowsing rods approximately five inches from each other, while the other attempted to insert their energy between the rods in order to push them apart, and then pull their energy back so that the rods returned to their original positions. Chetkin explains that it was easy to move the rods apart, but much more difficult to pull back the energy. The lesson learned was how easy it is to get involved with someone’s or something’s energy forces and how much more difficult it is to remove oneself from a situation. When asked, she volunteers that all the children in Lily Dale could successfully move the rods, that it
was a “lot of fun” and that it taught them deeper lessons about their own energy and power, and, therefore, how to conduct themselves in life. She speaks of this in a matter of fact way, as if she is explaining how they were taught to write cursive.

Chetkin next pulls out an image depicting the inevitable snowstorms that continually dump several feet of snow on Lily Dale throughout every winter. She and her older brother Mike, standing in the midst of three feet of snow in the front yard of their house and huddled together flashing broad grins, stare at us from the slightly faded photograph (Figure 56). Chetkin’s eyes brighten and her lips curl into a smile as she begins to recall aloud for me her winter childhood snow games in Lily Dale. Her house is situated adjacent to the Fairy Trail forest at the edge of town, a situation that turned out to be a winter advantage for her:

The winter here is, well, you cannot get outside because the snow just piles up against the door and you have to shovel a path out. It’s literally three or four feet . . . there’s a fence there now, by that church over there – they used to plow all the snow from Lily Dale there. And there’d be this massive mountain so we’d build these huge caves, we’d just dig out the center of this pile of snow and have these caves, and then we’d dig holes from the top and make slides down into the cave. It was so [much] fun; we had forts all over because there was just so much snow everywhere. And we’d take walks in the woods. (Chetkin 2008)

Without hesitation or prompting Chetkin launches into a series of recollections about the interactions she and her childhood friends shared with the trees in and about Lily Dale and its forests. The first was a description of the game in which they searched for two pine trees that were growing just close enough to each other that the space between them would allow the children to barely squeeze through into a fantasy world accessible by no other entry point. Next she spoke of the “Rainbow Trees,” again two trees next to each other only this time one much larger than the other. They climbed the taller tree until they
reached the top of the shorter one which they grabbed hold of, and jumping out and away from the larger tree, floated slowly to the ground as the tree bent from their weight.

Barely taking a breath, Chetkin moves to a description of how they also incorporated a common metaphysical activity of Lily Dale, the healing ceremony, into their play when they turned a normal tree into “The Healing Tree” by peeling its bark to use as a magical medicinal treatment for cuts:

C: We had this tree, somewhere over there. Its probably dead now because I think we probably killed it (laugh) . . . we’d peel the bark off of it and we called it The Healing Tree and anytime anyone had a cut or anything we’d go there and take bark from this tree and wrap it around the cut.

M: Did it work?
C: Well, we kept doing it so I guess we thought it worked [Chetkin laughs]. (2008)

Chetkin’s tone and demeanor do not change throughout the descriptions of the childhood games; she shows equal enthusiasm for each whether they contain a magical element or are simply examples of childhood creativity. To Chetkin, all the childhood play was of equal importance, whether it evoked spirituality or merely juvenile creativity. She and her friends moved easily between otherworldly space and physical reality, as most children do. However, Chetkin and her playmates incorporated Spiritualist beliefs into their fantasy play when they transferred the practice of metaphysical healing into their own “healing tree,” giving evidence that their childhood understanding of spirit’s proximity to the physical begins early and remains intact, albeit altered and refined, into adulthood.

In each of the memories Chetkin shares about her childhood she describes behaviors that fall nicely in line with Jones’ definition of “producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world” (1997:202). She and her friends produced caves and snow forts from the deep mounds of snow created by the Lily Dale snowplows, and in fact, the creation was a response to the existence of the mounds; the children acted upon seeing the snow and would not have produced snow caves if the snow mounds did not exist. Chetkin does not specifically share the types of games played within the forts, but they too, might be considered material behavior in that the play was a response to the physical snow structures they had created; the games were shaped by the interaction of the children to each other with the snow formations acting as the physical object around which the behavior was focused. The games Chetkin and her friends played with the trees and their energy manipulation of the dowsing rods can all be analyzed in the same
manner, substituting the trees and dowsing rods for the snow, and then recognizing the behaviors as responses to the object being present in the physical environment. And although the activities are all examples of material behavior, a distinction can be made between those that contained aspects of the metaphysical and those that did not. But in making such a comparison, the understanding of a fundamental truth underlying Chetkin’s belief system would be lost; she does not make that distinction herself and would never think to do so. Separating spirit, or anything else within the supernatural arena, from the everyday physical world is not natural to Spiritualists, therefore doing so attempts to understand a fraudulent model of their existence. They and we are better served when their world is viewed as the whole that it is, rather than in dissected portions that hold no context.

Over an hour passes in conversation with Chetkin and our time together begins to drift to its natural end. I thank Chetkin for her help, and I turn off the digital recorder, but our session, it turns out, is not over. As we continue our conversation about other topics, Chetkin casually mentions that her great-grandmother, Minnie O’Hara, was a trance medium in the early 1900s in Lily Dale, when a majority of the town was still a tent camp. O’Hara had lived in the house next door to Chetkin’s childhood home where we are conducting our session; it is the house that her grandparents occupied during her childhood and is now the home of her uncle. I turn the recorder back on to capture Chetkin’s description of the two ways O’Hara conjured spirit for her clients. Chetkin shares this memory of what she was told as a child, not what she actually witnessed herself:
C: She did two things. One, she would go into trance, and I guess at that time they had [séances] in tents . . . she would go into meditations and there would be people there and a spirit would appear next to her, of somebody, physically there. Somebody in the audience would say, “Oh, that’s my whoever, my uncle, my aunt, my grandmother.” She would, I don’t know if she would give a reading in those situations or what would happen, but these spirits would just appear from this substance—I don’t know what, like smoke or something—out of that, in front of people.

The other thing she did was—we actually have the trumpets upstairs. They have these things called a trumpet. If you want to see it I can go get it. It’s a series of metal cones; they collapse on to each other and then they extend out into this long sort of—they look like a telescope. And she would have people with her and they would have a séance and she would go into trance and the trumpet would float and they have pictures of it, and spirit would speak through the trumpet. They were really more into performing, I think, than they are now. Now it’s just straight readings but back then they had all these sort of phenomenon that they liked to do: spoon bending, all that stuff.

M: They still do that, don’t they?

C: Yeah, they do. I don’t know if they really do, I don’t know, I’ve never been to the class. But this is the sort of thing where you just hold it and the spoon just . . . we have all of these, I don’t know where they are, though, But we have all her spoons tied in knots, thick silver spoons just twisted up.

M: Tied in knots?

C: Crazy! Just in these crazy tight coils and everything, I don’t know. Yeah. (2008)

Chetkin retrieves one of her grandmother’s spirit trumpets, which I soon realize is one of several still in Lily Dale (Figure 57). She is eager to share that piece of her family, as well as Lily Dale’s performance history, yet because Chetkin brings up Minnie O’Hara after the session is over, it appears that Chetkin views her great-grandmother as any other ancestor as opposed to a celebrity dealing with spirit; I’ve already turned the recorder off, we are no longer looking at images and are immersed in the casual conversation typical of people who are new acquaintances, when she mentions one of the most relevant people related to Lily Dale and spirit in her life. This “matter-of-fact” revelation of O’Hara’s life
as a medium demonstrates that Chetkin does not consider spirit “special” in the sense that it stands out as odd, but rather that it is a natural part of life so intertwined with all the other elements of living that it deserves no special attention. In a like manner, she demonstrates through her voice, intonation, and easy movement between descriptions of childhood energy practice to digging snow tunnels and then on to healing trees, that spirit drops in and out of conversation as easily as the wind blows.

Chetkin’s memories, stimulated both directly and indirectly by the viewing of personal family photographs, reinforced her earliest connections to Lily Dale and her family,
neatly intersecting at the end of our session in the mention of her great-grandmother medium who lived in Lily Dale’s first decades on the same properties her family occupies today. Chetkin’s connections to Lily Dale and her past are quite strong as demonstrated in the volume and breadth of experiences she shared with me after seeing her photographs during our two-hour session. If we had we spoken to each other without the photographs, fewer of these experiences would have surfaced; her surprise and exclamation at seeing some of the images were clear indicators that her memories of these situations were not on her mind until the photograph prodded the memory to the surface. Chetkin spoke of raking never-ending autumn leaves, childhood friends who were not allowed to visit her in Lily Dale because of its reputation with spirit, her beloved boarding school in Connecticut, and her grandfather planting marigolds along the sidewalk of the house next door. She shared stories of the family New Year’s Eve ritual of burning letters and objects in the fireplace (another material behavior), how she met her best friend, learning to play chess at the age of three, and the ongoing jigsaw puzzle collaborations with her brothers. A photograph containing a preponderance of trees sparked the retelling of anecdotes she heard as a child about the woods surrounding their home, some of which she doesn’t believe as an adult, and an image of her friend standing on the boat dock (Figure 58) initiated her reminiscence of the long-gone swimming dock that sat in the middle of the lake which served as the diving platform from which they plunged to the lake bottom to collect handfuls of clay, just because they “liked the way it felt in [their] hands.” One photograph in particular, that of her grandfather in her mother’s “buttery yellow Mercedes convertible” that caught on fire in a gas station (Figure 59), brought forth memories of such strength and pleasure, she put it aside to
Figure 58. Lake image that inspired Chetkin’s memory about diving to the bottom to collect clay. Photo from the Chetkin family photograph collection. Used with permission.

Figure 59. Chetkin’s grandfather in his yellow Mercedes convertible in Florida. Photo from the Chetkin family photograph collection. Used with permission.
keep for herself. Multiple memories caused Chetkin to muse that she wished she could “do that again” or “that was really a lot of fun,” or “I should still do that.” Our session ended with Chetkin’s unsolicited comments that the exercise of looking at the old images reminded her of experiences she had not thought of in a long time, that she was quite pleased that she had participated, and she hoped I could schedule a session with her sister, who might also be a fruitful contributor and one who would enjoy a look back at the images of her childhood. These last comments and those made earlier, when Chetkin recalled a forgotten experience, are evidence that her use of fragments of memory to construct a new present state of mind were successful, and that through the activity of using her photographs as a launch for narrative, she reaffirmed her strong connection to the community of her childhood by sharing experiences she had within that community.

Chetkin’s profession as an energy healer is most likely the result of inherited talents that possibly predate her great-grandmother, Minnie O’Hara, and that were nurtured by her family and the Lily Dale environment. It is an example of how supernatural interests are threaded throughout an ancestral lineage, a pattern seen in all cultures embracing mystical beliefs, and possibly exhibited in the Fox sisters through their mother’s relatives. As might be expected, several of my contributors are Spiritualists whose families have deep roots in Lily Dale. Jana Potter was also raised in Lily Dale and like Chetkin, is connected to the town through an ancestor who was an active medium in the community. Potter identifies her grandmother, the medium Helen Candy, rather early in our session and names her as the first in her family to come to Lily Dale (Figure 60). Candy was French Canadian and arrived in town as a young woman, raising Potter’s father in Lily Dale after her husband had abandoned the family. By Potter’s description, Candy did
readings for “some famous people” and “just generally [helped] those she read for.”

Potter goes no further in discussing Candy as a medium at first mention, but shifts into stories that might be told about any grandmother. Potter describes Candy as a stern, outspoken woman but one who loved her family very much, making fruit tarts for her son and hosting an annual Christmas party where she, without fail, gifted each grandchild with a pair of home-made mittens and booties, prompting the kids to bet, not on what the gift was, but what color it would be. Candy was a successful Lily Dale spirit medium and, no doubt Potter has plenty of spirit experiences to share regarding her grandmother, but she does not dwell on that aspect of her life, as she so easily might with an outsider. In addition, if Potter has her own mediumship abilities she never mentions it, but is more interested in sharing the stories of growing up in Lily Dale, which she characterizes as “just like any other small town in America.”

Figure 60. Helen Candy, medium and grandmother to Jana Potter. This oversized photograph hangs in the Lily Dale Museum among other similar images of mediums. Photographed by M. K. Gaydos Gabriel and reprinted with permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
For our session, Potter chooses to use a collection of snapshot albums left by the Lily Dale community club when it abandoned the building to make room for the museum. She makes this choice prior to our meeting because, she explains, her photographs are packed away in boxes and not easily retrievable. Although these are not Potter’s personal images, she and her family appear in them often, as do her childhood friends and their parents. As she flips through the pages, Potter delights in recounting her childhood memories, laughing and wistfully sharing little tidbits of detail as she looks at the faded snapshots. Her recollections are sprinkled with comments intended to convince me, and possibly herself, that the experiences she and the other children shared were “just like [those] in other small towns” across America. These comments were most often expressed after she shared a particularly strong memory of group activities, both organized by the town or merely within the context of childhood play. In one such adventure she describes a chain of kids dressed in snowsuits “hooking” on to the bumper of the Lily Dale snowplow as it traversed the town’s streets clearing freshly fallen snow (Figure 61). At times there were so many kids dragging behind it that their weight slowed it to a crawl to the chagrin of the maintenance man. “Damn you kids, get off of that,” she describes him saying. “That was so much fun,” Potter grins. “But he got so mad at us for doing it”.

As Potter continues to look through the albums she reveals that she has held jobs at the Maplewood Hotel, the town’s entry gate, the Leolyn Hotel which is just outside the Lily Dale gates and owned by the Assembly, the paper route, and the gift shop which she now owns. Her anecdotes include several typical youthful shenanigans such as swiping grapes from the local vineyards, throwing rocks to break the streetlight in front of the Assembly Hall, or if the aim was perfect, to ring the Assembly Hall bell. She names Chetkin’s older
brothers as her hangout buddies, and with a laugh says, “Boy, they were something,” but then says no more of them. She speaks of summer days at the beach followed by after-dinner volleyball and softball games, and campfires into the evening hours. By all accounts, her narratives support her claims that the atmosphere in Lily Dale of her youth was similar to small towns across America, with good friends and youthful antics. She makes these judgments in the context of secular activity; from Potter’s perspective, when looking at the types of activities she and her friends enjoyed, this assessment is inarguable.

However, Potter makes a subtle unconscious distinction between Lily Dale and “other small towns” when she refrains from making the same comparison while speaking about the Spiritualist climate in the town during her formative years. Spiritual healing skills and
mediumship development is prevalent in Lily Dale, with the children participating in programs designed specifically for their learning levels. Potter and her friends were given regular and robust opportunities to learn and fine-tune their abilities to communicate with spirit and control energy. She speaks passionately about her belief in the importance of educating children in a Spiritualist environment, sharing her warm feelings about the dedicated teachers she was privileged to know through her youth. She mentions the children’s Lyceum and names several adults who were very active within the teaching community, and she shares with me the strong sense of community conviction to serve those in need, both spiritually and physically. However, Potter mentions specific spirit experiences so little that the thought crosses my mind that she wants to persuade me, and possibly herself, that Lily Dale truly is just another small town in America. By avoiding the topic of specific and personal spirit activity she moves me towards that understanding without speaking of the comparison during this discussion. Another explanation might be that she considers spirit so engrained within the culture that it is a matter-of-fact presence, and therefore she does not think to bring it up as a highlighted subject. She is more intent on sharing her personal memories ignited by the images she views, as I have asked her to do. This explanation gains support later in our session in an unexpected turn.

We have spoken for well over an hour when our conversation seems to be concluding but I have not yet turned off the recorder, having learned from my session with Chetkin that “it ain’t over til it’s over.” In these last minutes, in a manner similar to Chetkin’s casual mention of her mediumistic great-grandmother, Potter tosses me a nonchalant quip regarding childhood séances:
P: I remember, as kids too, those trumpets, we used to go to séances, trumpet séances, once in a while at Bill Rivers’ house. They used to do that with us kids when we were growing up here.

M: Tell me about that.

P: That was quite interesting. We went to his [Bill Rivers] house . . . and his mother [Flo Rivers], and brother [Ted], and I believe there was one other person, but . . . our youth group was in it and it was quite interesting how the ectoplasm built and the different energy built, and how that trumpet picked up and it spoke to you and it was things that it told you that no one would know about privately, or things happened or whatever; it was quite interesting. It was all pitch dark in there. First you’d see the trumpets. They were all placed in the middle and you weren’t allowed to get up or touch or do anything, and we were instructed that. And you had to sit in your chair and then when it came to you, you answered. It worked off your energy and I guess it worked . . . I think, Bill Rivers and his mom and whoever else, it worked off their energy and that’s how the trumpet was picked up and it could go around and speak to you . . . it was quite interesting.

I always wanted to, I always felt, why couldn’t you do it during the day? Why, if it was, you know what I mean, the energy, why did it always have to be in the dark or at night in a dark room? But that’s how we were taught that it works, so. But I can remember, too though, when we were in youth group and we did a lot of meditation, and we sat as [spirit] circle, it was genuine, because you know the things that came to you, once you’ve experienced it you know that it’s true. If you’re a fake, you’re a fake. But when it’s actually coming through and when you’re receiving, it’s incredible. When you give out information or that sometimes people will form over you and you can bring whatever that message is and when you experience it you realize that it is evidential. And my grandmother always taught us, too, that you always give something that is evidential and they can relate to, because then, you know and they know that you are working with spirit – you’re not working off the psychic part of it – that you are actually bringing something in. She was a good medium on that. But she always felt that after 4 or 5 readings, that’s it, because the quality of it wasn’t as good after that.

M: Because you would tire out, the person would tire out?

P: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. Because it does take a lot of energy out of you . . . and you have to watch your health because you are an instrument for serving spirit. A lot of them have to watch in the solar plexus area . . . diabetes and any other problems that start and you can get a lot of health problems if you don’t watch. She just always felt quality readings were 4 to 5 a day max. And that’s the old timers that felt that. That you couldn’t produce them (snaps her fingers a couple of times) 10, 12, or 20 a day . . . It does take a lot out of you. But I
think too, maybe as everything evolves, maybe different techniques that some of them are learning now, maybe they are able to keep their energy up and serve more . . . Hopefully the quality is still there because they are touching in with a lot of people that have a lot of emotion. (2008)

Potter’s memory of her experience with the floating trumpets in the séances are, like Chetkin’s account of her great-grandmother’s séances, examples of material behavior that are dominant within the Spiritualist historical and current culture. A more compelling aspect of this particular memory is the evidence of identity within the Spiritualist community Potter reveals when she questions the methods in which the séances were conducted: “I always wanted to, I always felt, why couldn’t you do it during the day? Why, if it was, you know what I mean, the energy, why did it always have to be in the dark or at night in a dark room?” Her repeated used of the word “always” indicates that she thought about this regularly as a child; her voice intonation coupled with the fact that she does not provide an explanation to resolve her conflict as an adult, leads me to believe that she is still asking the same question. It also indicates that if there was a trick involved in making the trumpets float, she was not privy to it, for if so she would not casually muse about the situation to an outsider in front of a recording device. Potter quickly follows up with the resolution, “But that’s how we were taught that it works, so . . .” indicating she is comfortable in the status quo of the Spiritualist practice of séance and floating trumpets and that she does not care to take the investigation further. This attitude is similar to that of those raised in religions that, unlike Spiritualism, are doctrinally based and followed without serious question. Acceptance of a practice or doctrine in spite of questions, is indicative of a strong identity within the group. To question further would be to pull away from the group identity, something Potter does not
care to do because of a strong Spiritualist conviction and possibly a loyalty to a comfort zone that has served her well through the years.

After the discussion of childhood séances, Potter softens her voice to speak about the private reading fees that have risen substantially since her childhood. Today, the average cost for a half hour reading with a registered medium is approximately sixty-five dollars; thirty years prior the cost was five dollars. Potter expresses concern, “There are a lot of hurting people out there. To me, when it’s a gift, it should be a love donation, whatever that person can actually afford.” Potter empathetically acknowledges the need for mediums to make a living wage but cautions that “spirit can take away too” if not used wisely. She continues that she might be wrong, that everyone is enabled to use their gift as they see fit. As for where she fits personally into the mix she says:

I always wanted to do readings, but my feeling is that my work is through our store. And there’s a lot of people that I do touch and help out in different things and [in] different ways that I pick up and I guess my helping tool is supposed to be through that. And I believe I was a merchant in a past life and that’s why I was brought in. And because I worked my whole life too, ever since I was young . . . And my parents instilled that in us, too, to take personal responsibility. We were all hard workers; we worked hard and we played hard. (2008)

With these words, Potter again confirms her ability to question how business is currently practiced by the Lily Dale mediums while keeping her allegiance to the Spiritualist principles. She explains that she was “brought in” to do the job she does (own and run a Spiritualist gift shop), possibly because she was successful in the same role in a previous life. She explains what her calling is and why, demonstrating she is confident she is on the path the universe has requested she follow this time around, foregoing her desire to practice mediumship herself. She never indicates whether she has mediumistic abilities beyond the average person, but accepts the “gift” of providing physical objects
through her gift shop as her contribution. It is interesting to note that Potter deals in the material objects (crystals, books, tarot cards, etc.) around which visitors to Lily Dale focus their own material behavior.

“I just love looking at these pictures,” Potter announces as she continues to turn the album pages, simultaneously interjecting what seems to be an infinite volume of recollected slices of experiences. She reflectively remarks, “I wouldn’t trade my childhood here for anything. It was wonderful . . . I have a lot of wonderful memories . . . now we bring our kids and they can’t understand what fun we had at that time; but we made our fun. It wasn’t computers; it wasn’t that—it was Lily Dale.” These statements contradict Potter’s convictions that life in Lily Dale was not unique in what it offered to its residents, especially during her years of childhood, but rather demonstrate that she appreciates, and maybe even revels in her fortune at having landed in a place and time that was a perfect match for her. Her choice of words, “I wouldn’t trade anything,” and her quiet but absolute tone evokes a sense of yearning for the earlier days, and in fact, is a bit melancholy in that her children cannot also have the same experiences she enjoyed.

The nostalgia aroused through the act of remembering helps her to reconstruct a portion of her childhood identity in Lily Dale. She finds pleasure in this reconstruction; she stated so numerous times throughout the session and it is evidenced in her desire to continue the interview session later in the day.

Our scheduled time is over before Potter can go through all of the photo albums. She is obviously enjoying the exercise more than she had expected she would, because before we part she suggests we continue that evening, if Nagy is available and willing to open the museum for us. Nagy, always hungry for more information about Lily Dale, readily
agrees so we reconvene about three hours later. This proves to be an even more fruitful session, possibly because Potter is already in a reminiscent mindset from our first session, has enjoyed looking through the photographs, and no doubt feels more comfortable with me through our time together earlier in the day. Potter first reaches for a framed photograph on the wall of the museum of the old train station, a hub of activity in earlier years, and the trigger for the following memory narrative:

When I was a kid . . . my aunt used to live across the lake . . . we would go over the bridge . . . it was between 1 and 2 the train would pass through Cassadaga and Lily Dale and we would run down and we’d put pennies on the track and they would flatten out. And, of course, we thought that was a big deal. But he also, the engineer, when he’d come through, and the caboose part of it, they’d throw us candy. So, every day we were lucky because we used to get candy and . . . it didn’t matter at that time what it was . . . that was a neat tradition. And they’d blow their horn, and us kids, we just thought that was the greatest thing . . . Then I can remember too, there was a restaurant and bar, I believe it was “Bucky’s” at the time. And we used to go to the back when he’d get his shipments when we got out of school and we’d ride our bikes over there and he’d give us, if we’d help . . . unload some of the things, my cousin and I, we’d get Orange Crush, and it was out of the old fashioned bottles, and that was a big deal, . . . to be able to get the Crush pack and we’d sit out in the back and watch the train come by again and . . . we’d be swinging our legs on the back porch. That was neat; those were fun times. I forgot about that until I saw the [photograph of] train station. (2008)

The train station image (Figure 62) Potter viewed was taken long before she was born and has no direct link to her memories of play and work associated with the trains that passed through town when Potter was a child; the image merely provided the vehicle for her memories to be resurrected within her conscious state. She confirms that the memory was forgotten until she saw the image and that she was pleased not only with the memory of the events, but of the memory of the feelings she had at the time of the events, “That was neat; those were fun times.” Emotions are inextricably connected to events and are the very reasons we choose to either keep a memory alive or bury it in forgetting. Potter,
in expressing her memory of the satisfying emotions involved in drinking Orange Crush and waving to the passing train engineer, anchors her childhood identity to those feelings, reinforcing the importance of her individual experiences as a child, and providing evidence for the validity of her own statement that she “wouldn’t trade growing up” in Lily Dale for “anything.”

Tucked among the snapshot albums is one that contains a series of black and white oversized images of Lily Dale landmarks made by an unknown photographer in the 1980s. Potter’s childhood had been spent in and among these landmarks so she is able to bring forth many anecdotal fragments from her own experiences at these locations. Time and again Potter shares anecdotes or pieces of personal experiences that are preceded or
followed by a comment that she had forgotten about the incident until she saw the image that reminded her of the event. Potter delights in telling the stories, laughing her way through them, at times with an air of disbelief that they actually did some of the antics she describes. A photograph of Fred’s Restaurant (Figure 63), now the Morris Pratt Institute, sparks a litany of memories from childhood in which she and her buddy Ozzie

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dusted up quite a bit of trouble. This is her narrative when first seeing the image:

Fred’s Restaurant, that looks like the Morris Pratt building . . . (coy laugh) I’ll tell you another story that I forgot about. When we were younger my mother had to go because her brother was killed in Colorado . . . so she left me with my Aunt Sandy and Uncle Harry who lived up on 3rd street. And in that Morris Pratt, with Ozzie, we broke into the bottom of it (you may not want to put that in there) but we broke into the bottom of the Morris Pratt. And Elsa Ischman at the time owned that building and she had a lot of antiques down in there, and there was a dog that barked and barked and barked . . . Well, we got down into that basement, Ozzie was always mischievous. We got down into that basement, he lifted us all down and this dog barked. And we took the can of green paint and we not only painted that dog but we painted all this antique furniture in there (Potter laughs for a couple of seconds).

And then he lifted us back up out. And of course, my aunt, of course, when they found all this, knew because we had it all, all over us, this green paint. And my father, who was livid . . . he was a painter and did different things for Dawson metal . . . they had to strip all of that furniture. I’ll never forget that. But she had it all in this basement and my building, where it is now, they had an alley way and us kids used to play in that alley behind that house . . . We used to play in there quite a bit and the windows [of Fred’s Restaurant] used to be open and [Ozzie] said “Well, let’s just go in and investigate.” Well, then we got in there and it was fun to open the paint and we painted things.” [Potter laughs again.] (2008)

There was a heavy price to pay for that prank in the way of parental anger, and public and private apologies. But the lesson was not learned as we see in the following narrative in which she tells, without taking a breath from the last, of another break-in, this time into Louie Joy’s house:

And Louie Joy’s house, Ozzie and I broke into because she gave us cookies one time and we wanted more and they went to town. And Ozzie said “Don’t worry,” he said, “we’ll just go on in and sneak,” ‘cause she had ‘em in the back in her kitchen . . .
there was [a] porch and then her kitchen. And we went to go in and all these dogs—the dogs wouldn’t let us get in and we were throwing peat moss at them and all this flour . . . we couldn’t get them off us. Well, anyways . . . they got so scared and they ripped all her curtains down in her living room and my mom had to not only clean the house, the house that hadn’t been cleaned for years, had to clean their house and also buy all new curtains, and believe me we both got spankin’s for that.

But Ozzie was like, oh, my god, I used to get into so much . . . his mom, honest to god, used to put a harness on him and tie him up to the clothesline. And he could get off and put himself back on that harness before his mom knew that he was gone. He was something else, I want to tell you. Probably that’s why he bowed out [laughter] —he didn’t want to say anything. We used to get into so much [trouble] Not that I really was like, broke in a lot, but you know, we, those cookies were quite important, you know. It wasn’t always my idea, it was, you know, Ozzie, . . . we weren’t going to hurt anything—we just wanted more cookies [laughter]. Used to drink out of mud puddles, it was like, oh god [Potter laughs]. (2008)

As it turns out, in later years as young teenagers, Potter and her friends would trek to the town dump after dinner where they swung from “cliffs” over a ravine on a rope and
pulley system rigged up by Ozzie, a skill he picked up, no doubt, from his days attached
to the clothesline. Potter expounds in a tone of respectful amazement that Ozzie could
build or fix anything that was electrical or mechanical in nature. Ozzie now owns a
successful construction business and remains a Lily Dale resident.

Again beginning with the comment that the forthcoming memory was forgotten, Potter
starts her narration of consecutive stories in which she and her friend Ozzie stir up Lily
Dale with their juvenile mischief. A decades old image of a building she barely
recognizes, absent of people and spirit, sparks a reservoir of memories that Potter had put
aside. In remembering she becomes quite animated, words flowing more quickly as she
launches into each of her anecdotes, laughing intermittently through the telling, and
ending in exclamations of amazement at her friend Ozzie and his inordinate capabilities
of escape. Potter’s laughter combined with her machine-gun fire delivery of one Ozzie
story after another gives evidence of a joyful recollection; Potter’s bond to her childhood
friend is palpable. Like the memories drawn from the train station image, the Ozzie
memories also evoke emotion—that of friendship and admiration of a long-term friend,
the thrill of adventure with a comrade, and the doom of getting caught in the act of
trouble. Parental wrath aside, Potter is thankful to have these feelings of childhood
restored, evidenced by her continuance of the sharing.

As Potter and Nagy look through albums together, both are enthusiastic about having
them, but for differing reasons; Nagy observes that more and more visitors in the
museum are interested in looking at the photographs from a historical standpoint and
Potter expresses how important she feels it is to preserve the photographs for residents to
view, especially “the younger generation” in order to provide them with a sense of the
more recent events of the town and its residents. Potter expresses again how thankful she is to have the albums to help her recall earlier friends and the memories of their times with each other. This last conversation between Nagy and Potter is a verbal demonstration of affirmed community identity in that they show an appreciation and a pride in having the Lily Dale photographs available for both insiders and outsiders, enabling a stronger connection to the town through knowledge of historical information and an understanding of its visual past.

During Potter’s recollections, she briefly characterizes Florence (Flo) Rivers, the medium who conducted the séances for the children during Potter’s childhood, as “so sweet and nice . . . a lovely woman . . . [gave] me a little reading here and there.” Flo’s gentleness and kind demeanor is continued in the personalities of her sons, Bill and Ted Rivers. They are both year-round Lily Dale residents and claim no particular power to communicate with spirit in spite of their mother’s mediumistic abilities and the celebrated status of her sister, Kathryn Baxter, as a trance medium. Ted and Bill’s involvement and deep-rooted beliefs remain intact, and present another example of the familial connections to spirit within Lily Dale.

Although the Rivers brothers are enthusiastic to talk with me about their photographs, when I arrive at Bill’s home they seem surprised that I really want to see photographs, and do not have any available, evidence to me that they do not consider their personal photos valuable, or do not see their importance to the conversation we are about to have. They are reluctant to go to their other homes in Lily Dale (Bill owned two at the time) to get some, telling me they are in boxes in the basement, wouldn’t be able find them easily, and so on, and I am silently disappointed, suspecting that the interview will not prove
helpful in my research. Instead of photos, we use the one wall decoration hanging in the living room, a painting of a Native American (Figure 64) done by a 17th century French painter who channeled through their aunt, Kathryn Baxter (Figure 65). In this instance, one painting is representative of their memories with their aunt, inspiring a long litany of narratives. This segment of our conversation that is based on the painting demonstrates the Rivers also live with the notion that spirit is a regular part of life; the matter-of-fact tone in which Ted delivers his story gives further evidence that they consider interaction with spirits “fascinating” while still within the realm of their more ordinary daily experience:

Figure 64. Painting of Red Fox created by Ted and Bill Rivers’ aunt, Kathryn Baxter. Photo taken by M. K. Gaydos Gabriel with permission of Bill Rivers.
Bill: The picture, there, is Red Fox and my aunt, she did that in trance, and that’s just one of them that we’ve got . . .

M: What was her process? Did you see her do it?

B: I didn’t, but Ted there, he witnessed it.32

Ted: The artist that worked through her and painted was an artist from the 17th century. And the only way that my aunt would know that he wanted to paint was she would get a tingling in her arm, left arm. And, it could be during the day, he may want to paint later in the night. It just depended when he felt pretty much like he wanted to paint but she could also control and tell him when he was painting not to wake her up during the night to do some painting. So, but she would get the tingling . . . She had a room setup in Niagara Falls, and at that time we lived at 418 First Street. And she would go in and put on her smock and then she would just get everything ready and then she would relax and go into trance and then he would take over and paint. But he wanted
to smoke a cigarette while he was painting so he wanted the long holder with
the short cigarette. I remember my mother lighting the cigarettes and as he
would smoke he would talk French and he would start painting. And he may
lay one in, he may lay two in, you just never knew what he was going to do,
but her eyes was closed—you never knew—and then as he would finish and
get done then she would start to come out of trance; then she had to bite into
an orange because she didn’t like smoking. My aunt did not smoke . . .

M: So you watched your aunt go into trance and you watched this happen?

T: Uh hum.

M: What did you think, as a kid, watching this?

T: I thought is was really fascinating, because I know my aunt couldn’t really
draw because she had arthritis in her hands and I wouldn’t let her color in my
coloring book. She couldn’t stay within the lines, couldn’t follow anything.

M: How old were you?

T: That’d be maybe in, say 12, in that area, maybe, say 12 . . . But he did quite a
few different things, painted watercolors . . then went into pastel, then finally
went into oil. And he’d only use Winsor & Newton paint and sable brushes . . .
. She had a friend that was in her philosophy class that spoke French and she
came over one time when my aunt was painting and they could talk back and
forth. In fact, she told him that my aunt said that if he didn’t stop smoking
she’d quit painting. So he stopped, he stopped the smoking.

M: And your aunt did not speak French.

T: Noooooo, no.

M: Was she left-handed?

(3-4 second pause)

B: I don’t think so.

T: Right handed.

M: So were you afraid when you saw your aunt go into trance?

T: No. No. No, ‘cause we were brought up in it. We were used to my aunt going
into trance.
But, he told the student that was with my aunt that he wanted sable brushes and Winsor & Newton paints. In fact, we still got her kit up here somewhere.

M:  How long of a period did he paint through her, do you think?

T:  Many, many years. (2008)

Ted mentions that he was “fascinated” with his aunt’s ability to channel the painter through trance but even at the age of 12, his childhood reasoning leaves room for a tempered reaction; he knew that while not in trance, she was unable to do something as simple as follow the lines in his coloring book. Keeping his coloring book neat held merit above his famous aunt’s abilities to channel an artist who had died over 300 years earlier. This attitude demonstrates that Ted took spirit in stride even as a child, that he was not overwhelmed by its presence but rather felt so comfortable in its presence that he dismissed any celebrity that outsiders may have attributed to it.

A twist on the material behavior exhibited in the séance activity of mediums can be seen in Ted’s description of Baxter channeling the deceased painter. The basic model of material behavior, production or response to the physical world, remains intact but who was exhibiting the material behavior—Baxter, the channeled painter, or both? Can the storytelling model of Georges be seen as a parallel when either the storyteller or the listener is a spirit? Baxter clearly demonstrated material behavior when she painted the canvases; the painting was the created object and her act of doing it was the behavior. She used specific paints and brushes requested by the painter, and not only did she paint what he directed but she grudgingly propagated his bad habit of smoking. In this
scenario, Baxter is the storyteller and the spirit of the deceased painter the listener, for she created the object with input from him, shaping what and how she painted based on his requests. They reverse roles when she, through a friend who spoke French, told him she would no longer paint if he continued to smoke; her input to an element of his creative process, smoking while painting, changed his resulting behavior in that he no longer required she smoke allowing the painting to continue. In spite of the fact that the paintings are attributed to the spirit and it can be argued that the spirit exhibited material behavior in that paintings were produced at supposedly his beckoning, Baxter always signed her paintings with her own name and not his, giving an indication that she felt she had a more influential role in their creation, regardless of the input she received from her channeled spirit. Keeping with a strict interpretation of the definition of material behavior (activity associated with the making of a physical object) I suggest that in the context of Ted’s story and his belief in the continuity of life after death, both Baxter and her painter can be credited with acts of material behavior. In doing so, I also suggest that many more instances of material behavior might be identified and studied if the spirit realm, as embraced by Spiritualists, is opened to further examination within the same paradigm; however, this will not be discussed within the boundaries of this study.

Ted and Bill were not afraid of their aunt going into trance, nor were they afraid during their mother’s trumpet séances, in which trumpets floated about the room sporting glow-in-the-dark bands encircling the ends so that they could be seen in the darkness of the séance room. Ted and Bill describe these séances in a similar narrative to Potter’s depiction, punctuating their account with their mother’s trumpet, placing it in position to demonstrate her exact séance circle setup (Figure 66). In doing this the Rivers
demonstrate material behavior in that they use the very same physical artifact used in their mother’s physical mediumship (in and of itself an act of material behavior) as the focal point around which they tell their story about her. They show me, the listener, her trumpet. I look at the trumpet and ask them to show me how she used it. They pull up two chairs to create the semblance of what a séance circle might have looked like and place the trumpet in front of them at the same distance from their legs as their aunt would have at her own séances. I ask if I may photograph them in this position and they willingly oblige me, even asking if the positioning and lighting are good enough for the photograph. In this scenario, two forms of material behavior have been demonstrated. First, the storyteller-listener model of Georges is followed when I ask for information
regarding the trumpet and its placement and they respond in a way they would not have without my question, thus allowing me to shape their story through my interaction and their response to it. Second, the act of using a material object, the trumpet, to understand the actions of the mediums during séance gives us a better understanding of the interactions between the mediums and clients within the séance circumstance, rather than the object itself; the object is simply the artifact through which we can explore the behavior of the individuals involved in the activity and ultimately the community. The storyteller model can also be applied to the material behavior element of my own actions in taking the photograph of the Rivers brothers and their mother’s trumpet in that the photo is the artifact I make, and the Rivers assist me in the making of it by posing, asking questions, adjusting positions, and looking into the camera lens; we are complicit in the making of the photograph, and work together in response and interaction to come to an agreed upon end product that pleases all parties.

The Rivers speak of their early adulthood in Lily Dale when mediums regularly practiced mediumship through séances, table tipping, and trance painting. Their account contradicts, as does Potter’s, the published histories of the town that suggest physical practice was ended in the 1940s. When I question the Rivers about this, they both shake their heads, confirming that physical mediumship did indeed continue until the “old ones” passed on and there was no one to replace them, suggesting a higher level of spirit physicality into the 1970s and early 1980s, approximately the same time frame that their aunt, Kathryn Baxter stopped channeling the French artist. Mediums were regular fixtures in the Rivers home when they were growing up and into their adult years in Lily Dale. Their mother and her medium friends routinely held nightly impromptu séances
and spirit circles in which spirit was asked to be present for communion with the physical world and to give messages of hope and guidance. In response to my question as to whether it was a usual occurrence for a visiting medium to transmit a message from the spirit realm to them in casual passing moments, both agree unequivocally that it was standard practice for them to receive messages from beyond outside of a spirit circle gathering. They left me with the impression that spirit advice was doled out as often as from their mortal parents.

When prodded about their daily life in Lily Dale, the Rivers respond with compelling stories involving their regular interaction with mediums and impressions of Lily Dale’s evolution over the forty years of their residency. I am keenly interested in their perspective regarding the cultural shifts for it is unique in that for decades the brothers were participants and observers rather than instigators in spirit activities, fitting the exact profile for my research partners. I ask many questions not related to spirit and the replies given, although on the surface seemed complete, do not go much beyond the queries themselves. If we had been looking at personal photographs, the stories they shared might be more anecdotal in nature rather than historical, and may have veered off the path of the original question, providing more personal narratives, in the same way Ted, in the midst of telling his story of his aunt’s channeling of the artist, muses that he would not let her color in his coloring book because she couldn’t stay in the lines. Her painting of Red Fox is the mnemonic object that prompted this story, and although not a photograph, is charged with the safekeeping of the memory (Whincup 2004:81) and therefore is an acceptable substitute around which the story is built. The absence of any other images, specifically personal photographs belonging to the Rivers brothers, leave avenues to their
more intimate (and in their minds, possibly mundane) memories unavailable to them and therefore to this project. Kuhn writes that memories provide the raw material for “narratives of identity” and that these narratives “are shaped as much by what is left out of the account . . . as by what is actually told” (2002:2). Following Kuhn’s logic, the left out memories she refers to are metaphors for the missing photographs in my session with the Rivers brothers, and the narrative is a metaphor for my research methodology when analyzed as a “material behavior” as described by Michael Owen Jones in his event analysis discussion of Georges storytelling model. In other words, my sessions with contributors mimic Georges’ storytelling model in that I am the listener and my contributors are the storytellers. When a photograph is present, we look at it together, the contributor has a memory brought forth and begins a story, I look at the image and ask further questions about it, thus guiding and in essence, asking the storyteller to modify the story based on my input as the listener. When I look at a photograph with a participant I ask questions that require a response, which in turn will take the participant to a deeper or different memory fragment, bringing out details that would otherwise have been left out. In the absence of the photograph, the back and forth still occurs in conversation, but takes on a different “shape” and one that misses the mark of my research goal because the mnemonic stimulus is not present. In these instances, a large number of ordinary experiences are not remembered.

This does not mean, however, that the sessions with Ted and Bill Rivers, and others in the same circumstance, are not valuable to them or to me. Because I sought out participants that are not regularly interviewed, I suspect they were anxious to connect to Lily Dale in a way that promoted their connection to the community, rather than sharing
their personal non-spirit stories that I requested. Because of the historical and current preoccupation with Lily Dale’s spirit reputation, spirit was the topic assumed to be the one I wanted to hear about as well as the one they wanted to share. It is because of the non-celebrated status they enjoy that these contributors gravitated to the personal stories of spirit: it provided a way to connect to the town’s reputation more personally, to join the ranks of those previously interviewed by media and other researchers for purposes different than my own. The ability to identify with Lily Dale’s more celebrated personalities through the common experience of having been interviewed as part of an outsider’s research interests gave them an avenue to connect to the larger context of the community. This connection became more evident when I returned to Lily Dale a year after my session with the Rivers brothers. Ted is a maintenance person for Lily Dale during the summer months so he is seen about town quite regularly. When we serendipitously cross paths, he greets me warmly and as we chat he mentions that he has available two more of his aunt’s trance paintings if I want to see and photograph them. The first is of an Eastern Indian royal figure (Figure 67) and the other is a self-portrait of the 17th century painter himself (Figure 68) whom Baxter channeled to create her paintings, which I am most anxious to see and Ted happy to share. When I arrive at Ted’s home, I see that he has set the paintings aside in his garage for my easy viewing and I am immediately struck with the contrast of this overt reaching out with the paintings to his reluctance to bring out photographs the year before. He willingly holds each painting in succession at the proper angle so that I am able to take advantage of the best light for my photograph. Ted is clearly enthusiastic to share his aunt’s work and continue to help in my efforts to understand Lily Dale and in turn, add to the record of information.
Figure 67. Painting by Kathryn Baxter. Photographed by M. K. Gaydos Gabriel with permission of Ted Rivers.

Figure 68. Self-portrait of 17th century painter who channeled through Kathryn Baxter. Photographed by M. K. Gaydos Gabriel with permission of Ted Rivers.
disseminated outside the gates of town. Interview fatigue has not set in with Ted Rivers, as it has with those mediums who have admitted as much because they are regularly sought out for contributions to media and academic projects. I suspect Ted is rarely interviewed; yet he does spend many evenings on the Maplewood porch visiting with guests, sharing knowledge about Lily Dale’s past and present, and chatting about his experiences, both with and without spirit. Ted volunteers the information to me that he regularly enjoys Sunday evenings in friends’ homes practicing physical mediumship in the context of séances and tipping table sessions. Lily Dale is engrained in Ted’s identity and he wears it proudly but with the humbleness and humility of a man who knows the world is more complex than he can physically see, and that larger forces are at work in the universe.

During my session with Ted and Bill Rivers, both repeatedly use the word “nice” in describing their early experiences in Lily Dale. And several times one or the other remarks that Lily Dale is not the same as it was in previous years when spirit séances were more open and numerous than the few they attend today. They speak of summers in Lily Dale from their early teens in which they began attending development classes for the young people, in which they worked with mediums and had some personal spirit experiences during these classes. They looked forward to the classes, and today are thankful to have lived in the era in which access to medium development was an institutionalized advantage in their community. Like Chetkin and Potter, also born into Spiritualism, the Rivers brothers are wistful in the recalling of their early memories, all of which contain a somewhat healthy dose of spirit activity right alongside the more physical aspects of living within the human realm of childhood experience. Relative to
Kuhn’s assessment that forgotten and left out fragments of memory help shape present identity, the Rivers provide a contented and fulfilled historical account of their lives based on the fragments they chose to remember, all positive in the context of the retrieval of the experience, while leaving out painful and unpleasant instances, whether remembered or not. That is how they want to think of themselves and it is the face they want, like all of us, to put forward for the world to see and understand their lives and community. Their identity is a patchwork of selected memories, and in sharing them with an outsider they reaffirm their personal identity based on ancestral connections and experiences rooted in the time and place they choose to reveal. The Rivers brothers share their memories quietly, without bravado, and with absolute sincerity in their tone. Their demeanor is at times wistful for the “old days” when spirit was more evident in town, and they concentrate more on the recollections of what those around them did rather than what they did, another indication that their own personal photographs might have inspired more personal memories.

Another contributor born and raised in Lily Dale is Raymond Taft (Figure 69), a third generation year-round resident whose ancestors were tradesmen, lumbermen, and artists rather than mediums. Taft was raised in Lily Dale by his grandmother who was born in 1889 and who as a child, came regularly to Lily Dale with her parents. She moved to town as a young widow with four children because work was plentiful in the two hotels. Taft does not share why his mother and father were absent from his life. When asked a few specific questions about his mother, he does not answer but mentions that she was valedictorian of her high school, going to work and getting married immediately upon
He tells me that his ancestors, including his father, worked in the trade and lumber industries; he mentions that he has two brothers, neither of whom has embraced Spiritualism with the same conviction as he has. Taft works in the steel industry, although he does not say in what capacity; his avocation is woodcarving, a craft he speaks of in an almost spiritual way. In fact, everything Taft speaks of boomerangs back to spirit and its ever-present existence “among us.” Taft is gifted with a richly deep voice and he uses it often to emphasize his points by speaking slowly, deliberately, and with authority in all matters. He exaggerates these qualities even more when discussing spirit, taking on the persona of a learned holy man, or one with such conviction in his beliefs that there is no
room for questioning them. Taft is a wealth of information about Lily Dale: who built what buildings and when they built them, the processes by which the houses were constructed, where the wood came from to build the homes, the professions of the working class people of Lily Dale who kept it going all these years. He speaks reverently about the goodness of the people, mediums and non-mediums alike, who make up the foundation of Lily Dale, and that everyone who is able to contribute does so for the good of the entire community. Taft appears to be playing the role of a town historian and Spiritualist advocate rather than an active participant in the town; oftentimes his delivery is that of a narrator in a documentary for Spiritualism or Lily Dale, depending on his topic of the moment.

Taft was aware that our session would involve viewing his personal photographs and speaking of his memories regarding them, yet arrives empty-handed at the Assembly office where we are meeting. When I ask him if he brought any images of his own with him he replies he did not, but gives no further explanation. He does, however, come ready to share what he knows and feels about Lily Dale. Four curled photographs, thumbtacked to an otherwise empty bulletin board in our meeting room, serve as the stimulus for our conversation. When seeing the images he says, “It’s nice to see the old pictures from around here that fall within my lifetime.” When asked which he wants to speak about first, he replies:

Well, what I was drawn to first was the picture of this lady sitting in the chair out in front of her house (Figure 70). She was a resident here many years ago and her name was Martha Kelly. She was a medium. She and her husband Alfred lived in a cottage which occupied the space which is now our backyard. When Martha passed away, after her husband was deceased, she left her property to the owner of our house and during a period of time in the 70s the house fell into ill repair, was vacant, and it almost fell in on itself, so it was torn down. But these were people,
the Kellys, that were here when I was born and raised here and she was, to my
knowledge, was always a medium, had been involved in Spiritualism early on and
her husband was, to the best of my knowledge, was someone who worked in the
industrial trades. Alfred in his retirement had a small building where he had
machine tools, sharpened lawnmower blades, shears, knives, the like of that. And
also made baseball bats, one of which he gave to my brother and it was a good
baseball bat. There was a lot of that going on around this area at the time because
this county was highly involved in industry many years back and these people were
a lot of people who were the old workers in the shops such as the one I work in
now. I work in the sheet metal trade and we’re just carrying it forward from what
our forefathers set down. (2008)

This is the first of several times Taft speaks proudly of carrying on the traditions of the
people who came before him, whether it be within the tradesmen community or his own
family from which he fervently claims a woodworking birthright. Touching a crafted
item created by a predecessor, to Taft, brings thoughts about the maker, allowing him to

Figure 70. Martha Kelly, medium
and friend of Raymond Taft.
Reprinted by permission of Lily
Dale Assembly.
connect with the person who spent hours in its creation. He depicts the people of Lily Dale and the surrounding area as ordinary unsung heroes whose steady, difficult efforts at building a community were rewarding for them and worthy of respect, admiration, and gratitude today. By using the word “forefathers,” Taft insinuates a relationship with the earlier contributors to the community, and by “carrying forward” what they “set down,” places himself among their company, thereby deepening his identity as an individual within a group of people he holds in high regard.

Taft shares very few personal anecdotal memories, no stories of his brothers when they were growing up, nor does he speak of any friends by name, preferring to provide a more general memory discussion in place of sharing small incidences. One of the few specific anecdotes relating directly to a childhood experience that he does share is similar to one many have experienced who were children in the 1960s and banished to the back seat of an automobile. It involves Alfred Kelly, Martha’s husband, and is inspired by the same photograph in which she sits in front of her house:

Alfred Kelly drove an old Rambler Nash car and at the time, in my childhood, when I was first aware of Mr. and Mrs. Kelly, he would run kind of a taxi service for people. Mr. Kelly’s driving around as a kind of a taxicab for people who had no transportation [slight laugh] was an experience at one point. We went over town to go grocery shopping and Mr. Kelly chewed tobacco, it was a warm summer day as I remember, and he would spit out the window. I had rolled down my window and going 40 miles an hour down the highway, things that are ejected from a car, (laughingly continues) especially in a liquid state, tend to reverse themselves and come right back in through the window. And I wondered at that point in time why anybody would ever want to have something like that, that they would have to spit out of their mouth, but I have continued Alfred Kelly’s tradition and chew tobacco myself because we can’t smoke cigarettes in the shop [laughs]. Grand souls, grand souls, god fearing people and strong in their convictions in life to have survived all the years and the trials that they survived, to make it to a point to where there is still someone left who recognizes them. This is what we wonder about when we go through this life. Will anybody be there to recognize me when I am old, to care for
me, . . . or in the passing state, the joy that these entities experience is the same as we experience. It’s like seeing an old friend after many years. (2008)

Taft ends this story by calling those he knew as a child “grand souls,” speaking of them as “entities” now experiencing joy in the same manner as living humans do. He switches from discussing his physical human experiences with them as a child to speaking of their spirit “entities” that he compares to “seeing an old friend.” Within the context of Taft’s Spiritualist belief in the continuity of life, he is intertwining the spirit world with his memories of the physical world, but in a slightly different way than Potter, Chetkin, and the Rivers brothers, all of whom casually spoke of spirit in terms of the physical manifestation of spirit events. In contrast Taft speaks of spirit in relationship to real people he has known and interacted with in his lifetime. He does not mention floating trumpets at séances or using his own energies to move dousing rods, but instead speaks of knowing and feeling that those who have passed are still present, not only in his memory, but in the room.

Taft explains several times throughout the session that speaking of deceased loved ones will cause them to “gather among us,” the first of which is when he shares a narrative upon viewing a photo of Florence Rivers, Ted and Bill Rivers’ mother. In it she is dancing with medium Jimmy Buchanan (Figure 71), who had been murdered in his Florida apartment in November of 1995. Taft’s deep voice is measured and respectful when he shares his memories of these two friends:

This gentleman here, his name was James Buchanan, the Reverend James Buchanan. And this lovely lady that he’s dancing with here was Florence Rivers. Jim was somewhat of a [pause] multi-talented gentleman, who had an absolutely lovely Irish tenor voice, could dance like Fred Astaire, and was a much sought-after [medium]. Jimmy, I believe, was born in Jamestown, and Florence came here from Niagara Falls, both of her sons still live here. And the beautiful thing about
Florence and Jimmy being here in this picture was the enjoyment that you see on their faces, aside from the fact that . . . Jim died some years ago down in Florida at his home, Florence passed away a couple of years ago here in her home, aged 90-odd years. Normal, everyday people enjoying life who gather close to us when you see a picture of them and recall times we’ve known. This goes back 40-odd years knowing these people. (2008)

Taft’s passionate accolades might be attributed to his true feelings about these former residents, but his choice of words coupled with his intense and slow delivery style towards the end of this short statement makes his account sound slightly scripted. Having grown up in Lily Dale, he would have many memories of these two prominent residents, yet he chooses to tell none of them. That coupled with his complete omission of anything related to Florence Rivers or to Buchanan’s life and demise appear to be a whitewashing

Figure 71. Florence Rivers and James Buchanan. Reprinted by permission of Lily Dale Assembly.
of his friends’ lives, especially in the case of Buchanan. I cannot know if Taft left out the well-known details of Buchanan’s flamboyant homosexual lifestyle and horrific death for personal reasons or to create a Pollyanna aura around Lily Dale and its residents. Not mentioning that Buchanan was murdered is surprising in light of the fact that newspaper articles regarding the killing and follow-up arrest of his assailant are available in the museum (Figures 72, 73), and at least one tour guide who conducts weekly ghost tours throughout the summer season routinely talks about Buchanan and his life and death when passing by the Lily Dale house he owned for over thirty years (Buchanan was a summer resident). However, a greater possibility for Taft’s omission, beyond intentional camouflage, may very well be that he felt that speaking of Buchanan’s gruesome

Figure 72. Newspaper clipping regarding James Buchanan’s murder in Florida. This and other clippings on Buchanan’s murder and his slayer are available in the museum.
end would be equivalent to speaking about it in front of the victim. Taft speaks passionately about his belief in the continuity of life, the basis of modern Spiritualism, and returns to the subject often throughout the entire session, repeatedly attesting that when deceased friends and relatives are spoken of or when their images are viewed they “gather close around us.” He may have considered a discussion of the details of Buchanan’s life and death in any manner other than positive in poor taste, if not disrespectful, if the victim were in the room. Clearly, Taft felt that Buchanan was there with us. When Taft speaks of Buchanan he pauses slightly, and although that is his general manner of speaking, perhaps the pause at this particular juncture may be indicative that the memory may have taken him to an unexpected place; since he did not bring his own images, the few on the wall were the only options available. It is possible

Figure 73. Newspaper clipping regarding the arrest of Buchanan’s murderer.
that he never had any intention of speaking about Buchanan until the photograph prompted the memory. In any case, he spoke in full circle when he used the memories of his friends to explain and confirm his basic understanding of the foundation of his Spiritualist lifestyle in that spirit is ever present amongst the living.

Taft’s omission of the circumstances of Buchanan’s death might also be construed as a reluctance to share unpleasant memories; however, he freely speaks of other unpleasant circumstances. The most overt is his description of the decline of Lily Dale in previous years, calling the time between 1957 to 1975 a “period of doldrums” for the town with vacant homes and few visitors in the summer months, stating that at times only 120 people were in residence. He helps me visualize the town streets during this period: “When I was a kid, you could shoot a canon down the street and not hit anybody.” He does not ignore the tough circumstances the town faced during his childhood, but he also does not offer any memories of his childhood that hold pain or discomfort personally for him. Taft considers it a huge advantage to have been raised in Lily Dale. To him, Lily Dale is a place set aside and energized for “renewal and healing.” He explains that Spiritualism and its beliefs are old traditional practices that have undergone renaming, and will probably continue to be renamed in the future. Unlike Potter, he admits that the experience of growing up in Lily Dale is different than in other towns, because he feels that Spiritualism does not follow the acceptable doctrines of Christianity and its offshoots, and that it is “more closely related to Buddhism than anything else,” explaining that Spiritualism, like Buddhism, is an “abstract philosophy and a way of life.” Taft’s statement that Spiritualism is a “way of life” demonstrates again, that he has incorporated spirit into his life in a way that he feels is differentiated from other
communities in America. Taft, through his declaration that Lily Dale is sacred ground reserved for rejuvenation, is confirming that Lily Dale is a religious community in which the Spiritualist “way of life” remains intact and prominent.

It is difficult to determine when Taft shares a memory versus historical knowledge gained through reading or oral tradition because the majority of his session is filled with details of the town, its buildings, and how things were done historically, with very little sharing of anecdotal experiences of his own. Taft speaks of the people he knew growing up and what they had contributed to the town in the way of buildings, services, and acceptance of others. His speaking style is a mixture of college professor, public radio announcer, and minister; he is confident in his knowledge and has a memory for names, dates, and details of historical events within the town. He knows nothing of a drowned horse in the lake a hundred years ago; however, he knows the methods they would have used to prevent one from going under should it break through the ice. Towards the end of our session, Taft speaks of Spiritualism, the continuity of life after the physical body dies, his philosophies about the reasons for human existence, and the true value of places like Lily Dale. I believe that had personal photos from Taft’s childhood been available for our session, he would not have given any more personal information. I sense that he has the specific goal of portraying Lily Dale in the finest light possible, and that his own personal relationship to the town is less relevant to him than the contributions of others, and he is just fine with that.

Although the images Taft uses to inspire his narratives are not his personal photographs, he, like Potter, uses ordinary snapshots of people from the town in which he was raised. The images are valuable to him in that the pieces of memory that he gleans
from them are unique to him alone. Before we even begin he states, upon seeing the snapshots on the wall, that he enjoys seeing the old photos taken during his lifetime. Although anyone who walks into the office can see those faded snapshots of an old woman and a middle aged-man dancing with each other and another elderly woman sitting in a lawn chair, the memories he retrieves when studying them are his alone; they are unique to him and he is in control of whether and how he shares them. This is best demonstrated by comparing Potter’s viewing of the photograph of Fred’s Restaurant to Taft’s viewing of a building that sits adjacent to the children’s park area on the back side of town. Potter sees the image of Fred’s Restaurant and even though it was taken many years before she was born, she is immediately reminded of her many escapades with her friend Ozzie; she thinks of one personal anecdote that leads to another, and then another, all memories in which she is a central character in the action. In contrast, Taft views a faded color snapshot of a Lily Dale building, most likely taken during his lifetime, prompting him to speak about the play area just beyond the building; he speaks of the recreational structures and the people who built them, including a testament to the contributions of all to the community, rather than sharing a personal experience, of which he undoubtedly had many, in relationship to it.

Both of the memories spoken of after viewing the building images give evidence of strengthened identities, but in differing ways. Potter’s individual memories with Ozzie confirm her appreciation for her childhood friends and the camaraderie she shared with them, eventually leading to a statement in which she embraces the community when she says that she “wouldn’t trade” her upbringing in Lily Dale for “anything.” Taft skips the individual identification in his memory sharing, although it is assumed he did have them,
and begins to talk about the community immediately, the contributions everyone made and the general camaraderie of everyone in the town as a whole. Both Potter and Taft arrived at a level of community identity in which they verbally expressed an appreciation for Lily Dale, although they approached that end with very different memories.

Lily Dale Transplants

Penelope Emmons, one of two mediums included in my research, was also born into Spiritualism, but she was not raised in Lily Dale. She and her husband Charlie (Figures 74, 75) are friends of my hosts Frank and Shelley Takei, who introduced me to them early in my visit. She and Charlie have owned a home in Lily Dale since 1998 but had

Figure 74. Penelope Emmons, Lily Dale resident. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
rented a summer cottage in town for the ten years preceding their purchase; Penelope had been a regular Lily Dale visitor before meeting Charlie. She is psychotherapist, and although a registered minister in the School of Healing and Prophecy, chooses not to practice mediumship in Lily Dale; Charlie is a sociologist at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania specializing in popular culture, music, the sociology of science, and the paranormal and speaks multiple foreign languages. Their photo album of the renovation of their house was used to share memory details of their journey from renters to homeowners (Figure 76). This is an excerpt of Penelope’s narrative about the first inkling she was given that she may own a home in Lily Dale:

P: The story of buying this cottage is what I wanted to share with you. This is what it looked like [Figure 77]. We had rented a house here that Connie owned [that] looked at the back of this place and [we] thought, oh this ought to be torn down
it was awful looking . . . so there is a couple of stories about getting this cottage. So we had been renting here. And Charlie was always saying that, “You don’t ever put your money in Lily Dale. Look at Lily Dale.” He had various comments, he’s a professor and he was very logical about the whole thing. Well, in 1988, Neil Rzepkowski, I was with him walking down Buffalo street, when he saw a place for sale and talked to the person and put it on his MasterCard. It was $8000.

M: He bought a house on MasterCard?

P: Yeah . . . I thought, man, when I could ever put a cottage here on MasterCard, I’ll do the same thing. Now, at that point in my life—Dr. Neil, of course had a job—I could never have put $8000 on a card and not felt anything but nervous. You know, how am I going to pay it off? But that’s what I had thought, so I had planted the seed then. He [Charlie] didn’t think it was a good idea, and I didn’t think much about it until one day [ten years later], I was taking a walk around Lily Dale, one evening, evening time, I was by myself, and I circled around and then I went down along the lake, what they call the Middle Lake that looks like a creek behind Jan and Jay’s. As I approached the third house from the corner I saw these rather awful looking gold painted French doors. I mean they were really shiny goldish, they weren’t like a golden color, they were metallic. They caught my eye, it was a little before sunset . . . I don’t think the sun was shining on the gold metallic part but I think on the glass, the sun hit the glass . . . And they really sparkled and made me look again. So they had been put out for the trash. And I heard a voice that said “Oh, those doors are for your cottage.” And I stopped, and I looked, and I said “What cottage?” And I heard again, “Those doors are for your cottage.” And I said, “Oh.” So I finished my walk and I walked to Connie’s house and I said, “Connie, you have a station wagon, can I borrow it? I have found some doors for my cottage.” And she said, “What cottage?” And I said, “I don’t know but that’s what I heard. Can I lean them up against your house, because I don’t know where to put them? But obviously, if I’m going to use them, I’m not going to leave them there for a long time because they will rot.” And she said, “Sure.” So I got the doors and put them in her car and put them against her house. And I thought, “How am I going to tell Charlie about these doors and a cottage?” . . . But I figured the right moment would come at some point and I just let it go, and didn’t really worry about it. (2008)

Penelope continues the story, leaping ahead to another day that summer when she and Charlie were in the midst of interviewing spirit mediums for the book they would later author together. They were engaged in an especially long interview with an elderly male medium when Penelope decided that Charlie could conduct the remainder of the
Figure 76. Emmons house at the time of purchase. Photo from Charlie and Penelope Emmons’ photo album. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 77. Renovated house belonging to Charlie and Penelope Emmons. Photo from Charlie and Penelope Emmons’ photo album. Reprinted with permission.
discussion without her. On her way back to Connie’s rental cottage, she took a short cut she had never taken before, passing next to the house that backed up to their rental, the house she and Charlie had always thought needed to be demolished. There was a “For Sale” sign in the yard and the owner was standing on the porch. In spite of her previous assessment that the house was an eyesore, Penelope asked if she might see the home. Penelope readily admits that the inside of the house was better than the outside would “leave one to expect,” although it did in fact need quite a bit of work. The price tag was $13,000. A few days later Penelope returned to the house and asked if she could sit in the front parlor to meditate on whether she should purchase the home. In true Lily Dale fashion, the owner readily agreed. Penelope sat in one of three rocking chairs in the parlor, closed her eyes and “asked spirit if there was a reason [she] was to buy this cottage.” When she opened her eyes, she saw the two rocking chairs across from her moving to and fro, and she had the distinct impression of Jimmy Carter and Georgia in her mind. Penelope is pragmatic when she tells this part of her memory:

I am not one that has seen, I mean, I know rocking chairs can rock, but I’m not one who remembers seeing that before that day, so it caught my attention. But I didn’t have any particular information that Jimmy Carter or Georgia or anything . . . but I was thinking, well, hmmph. This is kind of a nice room. (2008)

When the owner returned to the room, he pointed to one of the rocking chairs and told Penelope that his father, Jimmy, had died in that chair and that the other rocking chair came with the house; he did not know if it belonged to her but the medium Georgia Carter, had lived in the home for over thirty years, so it was certainly possible. Homes in Lily Dale are often sold with furniture because many of them are used as summer cottages, and therefore are not furnished with valuable or heirloom pieces. When
Penelope returned home with the details of her second visit to the house, Charlie softened his stance, and agreed that they should buy in Lily Dale in spite of his more solid investment philosophy. Penelope attributes this change of heart to the fact that they had been interviewing spirit mediums regularly since their arrival that season and Charlie was, therefore, more susceptible to a persuasion of this nature. Since all land in Lily Dale is owned by the Assembly, the small asking price of $13,000 for the house was an amount Penelope had in a savings account; she was able to “buy the house as easy as if [she] had put it on MasterCard.”

The story does not end there, however. The golden doors from the trash heap (Figure 78) that Penelope had picked up earlier that summer were a perfect fit for the opening in the parlor in which we now sat, the same room in which Penelope meditated to determine if she should purchase the house. The doors needed no sizing when the carpenter placed them; in fact, they were of such a remarkable fit that it appeared they had been made for the space. Charlie suggests as much when he reveals that the pile of debris from which Penelope rescued the doors was in front of the house that Marion Skidmore had built, the same Marion Skidmore who invited the first Suffragists to speak on Lily Dale’s platform. It was the very same house (Figure 79) into which she moved immediately after vacating the house the Emmons now own. He suspects she may have moved the doors from her old house to her new one.

The entire narrative the Emmons tell of their ten-year passage into Lily Dale home ownership, beginning with the MasterCard purchase of a friend’s house and concluding with the finding of golden doors and the inspired purchase of the house in which they seemingly belonged, is a journey of material behavior, with the doors and house serving
Figure 78. Doors Penelope Emmons found on the street prior to her buying a cottage in Lily Dale. Photo Credit: M. K. Gabriel.

Figure 79. Home built by Thomas and Marion Skidmore and the site where Penelope Emmons found her golden doors in a trash heap. It is now the National Spiritualist Association of Churches. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
as core objects around which their activity hovers. In looking at the time span as a whole, Penelope’s actions as material behaviors become clearly delineated, in retrospect, in relation to the establishment of that home. As outsiders, we must look historically at her actions and relate the acquisition of the doors to the eventual house in which they now reside, something we know to be true in the present. From Penelope’s perspective, her collecting the doors was done in the absence of the physical house but with the underlying impression that a house did indeed exist; when Penelope rescued the doors from the trash heap in front of Marion Skidmore’s second home, she did so with the intent that they would be for her house; not knowing which house was immaterial to her at the time. The trust Penelope shows in her own intuition does not negate, but instead supports the idea that she acted in response to the knowledge of a physical house, albeit not yet physically revealed but real nonetheless to her. This example further supports the Lily Dale acceptance of spirit and the physical as equal, if not one and the same, within their lives. Penelope demonstrates, once again, material behavior towards the house when she sits in the rocking chair in the front parlor to ask spirit if there “was a reason [she] should buy this house,” only this time the house is a physical structure and her process by which she makes her decision, meditation with spirit, is the behavior in response to the house as well as in the ultimate making that house her home. Both the door salvage and the house purchase meditation are behaviors done in response to the house or, in Lily Dale fashion, the “spirit” of the house.

The Emmons talk me through their entire photo album containing only images of their Lily Dale house in various stages of renovation. They speak of the contractors they hired, both the one whose work needed to be torn out and the one who ultimately finished the
house, the workers’ personal lives, and the aches and pains suffered by Charlie while stripping wood and loading dumpsters. Penelope mentions that the house is built on an original tent platform, the foundation supported in the center with a sawed off tree trunk and the four corners by the original pillars that formed the support for the tent floor. The excitement in her voice as she explains this detail shows a glint of satisfaction that the house is so closely connected to the origins of Lily Dale as a tent city. Charlie is thoughtful and reflective in sharing his memories of the renovation of the house. His voice becomes animated while discussing the unexpected treasures of 1930s newspapers and an article about the Boswell Sisters, a group of singers from the time period that Emmons considers “one of his favorites.” He becomes even more reflective as he muses about the importance of understanding the lives of those who lived in the house before them, wondering about people whose feet crossed the back porch threshold so many times that it bears an indentation from the wear. He comments that the most valuable aspect of the house and the renovation was the history of humanity and lives lived within the space. This attitude mimics that of Raymond Taft in his discussion of the tradesmen who preceded him in his work in the steel mill and his respect for those who built the structures still standing in Lily Dale. Both men express feeling connected to persons who shared the same space as they currently do. By attaching themselves to those who came before them, Taft and Emmons are exhibiting a common Spiritualist belief that spirit is alive and can be connected to through objects. This is itself a material behavior in that the object they touch and see generates for them a sense of spirit, previously human, that still exists within their sphere of sensibility. Meditating and communing with the feelings they receive from the objects is first, a direct response to the object. Further, it is an action that
produces knowledge around that object and therefore is confirmation in their belief in the continuity of life and universal connectivity. Knowledge builds strength of conviction, which in turn reinforces identity, both individually and, in the case of shared collective knowledge within the context of Spiritualism, increased identity as a member of the larger group.

A narrower lens can be employed to view the Emmons’ identity as members of the group of Lily Dale homeowners who bought dilapidated houses and spent tens of thousands of dollars on endless renovations to make it habitable, all the while knowing they could never own the property on which it sits. That financial leap of faith in the community sets them apart from the residents who inherited their homes or who rent for the summer months. Construction horror stories involving absent contractors, leaking pipes, and unexpected under-the-floor disasters are standard fare in most accounts regarding old home renovation, so I am not surprised when the Emmons reveal their share of them as we go through their album. The fact that they have taken the time to produce an album of the house showing before, during, and after images is an indication that they take ownership of the entire process as well as the physical house, including the memories of wasted dollars paid to an inept contractor, sore shoulders, and rotten ceiling joists. The large cash investment required to buy and renovate a house in Lily Dale is indicative of a commitment to the community that surpasses that in another location for several reasons. First, any future buyer must have already been a member in a Spiritualist church for one year, documented by the member’s church in a letter describing status and level of participation in its activities; second, they must be a member of the Lily Dale Assembly which requires an interview with the Assembly board in which the applicant is
asked specific questions about the practice of Spiritualism; and third, they must be approved as a purchaser by the Assembly board prior to the sale. These three stipulations significantly reduce the pool of potential buyers. There are no loopholes to these requirements as the Assembly holds the lease to the land on which the houses sit; without a lease, the home cannot be inhabited. In addition, the buyer must pay cash for the house—few mortgage companies will loan money for the purchase of a house residing on land owned by a third party. Last, a house that has been renovated will have a much higher price tag on it; it is much more difficult to find someone with $60,000 cash available to purchase a renovated house than it is to locate a person with enough credit on a MasterCard to buy a broken down shell of a house. The Emmons’ photo album depicting their investment in time, money, and sweat is symbolic of their loyalty to Lily Dale as a community and the confidence they have in their own identification as Spiritualists.

When the last page of the photo album is reached, the Emmons continue their memories by looking at the images they have hanging on the walls of the front parlor, the same room in which Penelope asked for guidance in the house purchase. Penelope immediately begins to speak of her grandmother, Mommo (Figure 80), who played an extraordinarily influential role in her life. Penelope exudes excitement when she says, “I love to talk about Mommo.” She describes her grandmother, Irene Smiley Cosner, as a medium, but as the wife of a doctor she did not need to practice for income. Born in the 1870s, Mommo earned a master’s degree in elocution in the 1890s and traveled about the country advocating for women’s right to vote and prohibition. Penelope spent large periods of time with her grandmother when she was small because of recurrent illnesses
her mother suffered. And although Mommo guided Penelope in her mediumistic
development, Penelope remembers having special intuitions, an ability to travel outside
her body during sleep, and a spirit guide she was able to visualize as a turquoise light as
early as the age of three. She tells this story in illustration of her earliest memories of
speaking with spirit:

P: When I was born my parents were not into seeing things or hearing things but
when I would see things or hear things or talk about energy around people or
talk about somebody I saw that was dead, they would encourage me. And I
would be able to, with Mommo and her friends, take my shoes off and stand on
the coffee table and give messages to people so I was maybe 3 to 4 up to 8 . . .

M: Do you remember the very first time you did that? Do you remember how you
felt?

P: Yes, I felt so special because my shoes had buckles on them, they were like
Mary Janes with buckles. And I felt like I was the center of attention. I must
be really special because I was allowed to take my shoes off . . . my Aunt
Margo has that table and chairs in her house still; she’s 93. But that coffee table had some little tiny chairs and I was able to step on to the chair and step on to the table and be in the center of this group, and they were all looking at me and listening to me and I was really important because I was allowed to stand on the furniture. [It] didn’t have anything to do with my being special because of what I was saying. [I thought] “I must be really special ‘cause I could stand on the furniture.” (2008)

Penelope looks back and laughs at her thought process as a child, a time when the significance of standing on the furniture was evidence that her messages were indeed special. The memory of being perched on the table stands in equal if not greater importance than the memory of the actual giving of spirit messages. Her feelings as a child suggest that she communicated with spirit much more often than she stood on the table, therefore she perceived her spirit communication to be a more ordinary experience in the hierarchy of events in her life than table-standing. This juxtaposition is obvious to the adult Penelope because she tells the story with laughter; however, she, like the other contributors already discussed, shares spirit experiences on the heels of non-spirit experiences, giving all memories and anecdotes equal merit.

Discussion of Mommo leads Charlie to mention that the chair in which Penelope is sitting, Mommo’s chair, is in the “hotspot” (Figure 81). In a twist to my methodology, he asks if he can tell me a memory about a photograph of the hotspot he can no longer find—a memory about a photo rather than from a photo. Here is a portion of his narrative:

C: It really bothers me that I can’t find it, but here’s what was happening at the time. Penelope’s mom died and the very next day she was the minister at the Forest Temple marrying my sister to her husband . . . I took a photograph this way [of Penelope sitting in her grandmother’s chair] and there’s a really interesting paranormal photograph. It’s not just little orbs and dust type photograph . . . you can see through this thing, it’s like a fabric that goes over most of the photograph. It looks as if it were a curtain except it’s got veins in
it; it’s like 13 going into one curve and 11 coming out. So it makes you wonder what happened to that, but you can see it clearly enough, but you can see right through that thing.

P: Imagine organdy or something. And I’m sitting there but there’s this veil or fabric or something.

C: And I really investigated to see if anyone was wearing any clothes like that. But it really doesn’t make any sense. When you see it, it’s like a double exposure but there isn’t anything else on the film that’s odd, nothing at all. And I was also taking video and there’s nothing on the video, right about the same time and I didn’t get any anomalies on the video. So, I’m thinking it has something to do with her mom dying. (2008)

Charlie immediately launches into another incident that occurred at the same time

Penelope’s mother died in which a cast-metal commemorative plate of the Flagship

Figure 81. Mommo’s chair, now placed in front parlor of the Emmons Lily Dale cottage. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel with permission of Penelope Emmons.
Niagara (Figure 82) popped off the wall in a poltergeist-like manner, flying into the middle of the room and dropping to the floor but breaking nothing in its path. It was one of several plates that were designed by Penelope’s father and that she has lining the wall over the “trash heap” doors. Of more significance, Charlie feels, is the fact that Penelope’s mother had worked on a fund-raising project for the restoration of the Flagship Niagara and that this particular plate was the only plate that came off the wall. Penelope adds the evidential remark that there was nothing out of order with the plate’s hanging mechanism or the nail holding it on the wall. In sharing these two stories of
spirit, Charlie does speak specifically about spirit and considers the two incidents as evidential, harking back to the days of the earliest Spiritualists when proof was imperative and in reality what everyone is still looking for. Charlie, not born into Spiritualism or mediumship, is an academic who studies the supernatural phenomenon experienced by others and who has made further investigation and analysis of the topic his life’s work. Charlie takes spirit in stride as every other resident in Lily Dale, so his singling out of spirit, one inexplicable occasion following another, is indicative of his keen interest from a professional perspective. He does not try to convince anyone of the existence of spirit or poltergeist phenomenon; to the contrary, he looks for every possible natural world law that might explain any incident. He shares the stories not for sensationalism as a visitor might, but as a colleague and intellectual searching for truth. Charlie welcomes discussion of the metaphysical, and as a four-time author and subject matter expert for multiple episodes of the television production “Ghosts of Gettysburg,” looks for others to stretch his view of the paranormal. Charlie’s education coupled with the need to protect his academic standing at Gettysburg College and reputation within in his profession tempers his findings, making his assessments more measured than they might otherwise be. His careful evaluations and subsequent reactions to personal spirit experience bestow greater credence to his viewpoints regarding spirit than what might otherwise be given. His individual identity is couched in his professionalism and broad research across all elements of the supernatural.

The Emmons felt very comfortable in contributing to this collection of data. The discussions we had regarding the house, those based on the photo albums they had available in Lily Dale, included memories of spirit in terms of how they acquired the
house, but the specifics of the renovation were rooted in the realm of human physicality: sore muscles, full dumpsters, the perils of dealing with incompetent construction workers, and appreciation for those who came before. At no time did either of them mention that the memory was forgotten until they saw the images, as Potter, Chetkin, and others often did. They were confident in telling the stories of their renovation, as if they told them regularly; the images were more of an outline for the telling rather than a catalyst for the memory. Both searched for details, at different times (neither could remember if they bought their Lily Dale house in 1997 or 1998), but they always had an awareness of the incident or situation of which they spoke. This is most likely due to two reasons. First, the images utilized to spur their memories were recent, within the past ten years, and they were images from a time when they were well into adulthood. The memories Penelope shared of her early spirit experiences were a result of looking at an image of her grandmother, which brought forth rather quickly the more significant incidences associated with her. Had we had access to snapshots of Penelope as a small child in various situations with siblings and friends, her memories would have been of a different nature, more inline with those of Chetkin and Potter, and quite possibly, because of the much longer span of elapsed time, she may have spoken of recalling forgotten memories, as they both did.

The Emmons freely talk about spirit, although in a slightly different tone than contributors who grew up in Lily Dale: seemingly important spirit experiences begin their narrative rather than being inserted later in the conversation, or even at the end as in Chetkin’s session. Their unrestricted movement in and out of the topic is apparent in the Emmons’ conversation, and they mimic other contributors in that there is little
differentiation in the delivery manner in which spirit and non-spirit anecdotes are shared. However, spirit seems to be incorporated into their psyche in a slightly different manner in that they begin their session talking about spirit experience (Penelope finding the golden doors). This could be related to the fact that they have chosen to move to Lily Dale rather than it being a seminal element of their earliest existence. The anecdotes shared by Penelope and Charlie Emmons, although not forgotten and subsequently recalled, still play a vital role in shaping their view of who they are and their place within the community of Lily Dale. Penelope said that even after years of coming to Lily Dale, and after having earned her degree as a minister in the Spiritualist religion, she never had the overpowering thought that she should live in Lily Dale, until she found the doors for her cottage. And it wasn’t until ten years later that she bought a house; and only then making the decision because of an experience she and Charlie considered evidential of spirit speaking. Theirs was a relatively long road to making a commitment to a more permanent life in the town and their place in its community. The slow emergence of the Emmons into Lily Dale perhaps accounts for their zeal in now sharing their experiences throughout that process. Both very comfortably and often speak of spirit in their stories, not holding back until the end of our session, but rather beginning with it. Their memories about Lily Dale are expressed with intonation that is more excited, a more recently found passion that radiates a little brighter than that of the nostalgic tone of the residents who spent their childhood in Lily Dale.

Another resident who bought not one house, but two, in Lily Dale is Connie Griffith (Figure 83). A retired engineer by profession, Griffith is also a registered medium who is open for business during the summer season in Lily Dale. Griffith explains that when she
first visited Lily Dale, she was not interested in becoming a medium and was, in fact, a curiosity seeker more than anything. Several classes and more personal experiences with spirit convinced her that she wanted to pursue spirit communication more seriously, which ultimately led to her ordination as a minister in the Spiritualist church. When I spoke with Griffith she had a basket of photographs available, even to her own surprise, since she is a summer resident. Both houses Griffith bought in Lily Dale were the result of her using spirit help to make her purchase decision. She pulled out a photo of her first house and tells this story (Figures 84, 85):

G: This is what my house looked like when I bought it . . . When I was in Lily Dale renting a place here, it’s like I felt I wanted to buy a place but I didn’t know for sure, and at that time I didn’t have work, so who knew what was going to happen.
Figure 84. Griffith’s first house in Lily Dale at the time of purchase. Photo from Griffith’s photo collection. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 85. Griffith’s first house after renovation. Photo Credit: M. K. Gaydos Gabriel.
M: You mean work as a medium?

G: I mean work period.

M: You were in consulting then?

G: I never. Oh, at that point I never expected to be a medium. Farthest thing from my mind. Didn’t want to go there. Didn’t like doing that. That’d never happen. . . But I thought if I am to stay in Lily Dale . . . then I wanted to find out which houses if any in here were ones that would be acceptable for me to consider living in. So I didn’t limit it to any one house, but which ones were they? So I took my dowsing rods and walked all the streets of Lily Dale . . . there must have been a half dozen houses that the rods pointed to as ones to be considered and this was one of them. But, well someone was living here at the time.

M: So there wasn’t a “For Sale” sign on the house, so you didn’t distinguish between what was for sale and what wasn’t?

G: No things change, so I just did the walk. Just kind of noted them down . . . most of [the houses] in Lily Dale at the time looked pretty bad. This looked like the slums. Lily Dale has improved a lot since then. It was really, really bad. (2008)

The house that Griffith now owns was eventually put on the market; she bought it for $18,000 without even having seen the second floor, and spent the next several winters renovating both the inside and out (Figure 85).

Griffith employed dowsing again to help her make decisions on the purchase of her second house. She shares the story when she shows me a photograph of her next investment in Lily Dale (Figure 86):

I couldn’t be content with one house. The first winter I moved here, because I didn’t have anything to do, I bought another house. This is the other house that I bought. When I bought it, Lily Dale was selling houses that had been abandoned for auction. So you would go down and you’d put in your bid for whatever you wanted. So I dowsed it—I took a pendulum and I wrote some numbers on a paper anywhere from $50 all the way up to $1000. And I had gone through this place, you stepped in, you went through the floor, it was completely rotted out. Everything would have had to be redone with it, but the structure was still standing. So I took my pendulum and I dowsed to see how much I should pay, should I bid, first of all, on this house and how much I should pay for it and then what the outcome might be for it. So it said, “go for it, bid $175” I did and I got it. (2008)
In both house purchases made by Griffith, she practices the model of material behavior in the context of Spiritualism by responding to the dowsing rods that were the objects around which she acted. More significant in Griffith’s recollections is that she chooses not once, but twice to make her commitment to Lily Dale in the purchase of a house. She was not raised as a Spiritualist, but rather came to Lily Dale through her own personal journey of spiritual discovery. Griffith and Penelope Emmons, neither raised in Lily Dale, both became ordained in the Spiritualist church after discovering Lily Dale and relied on their intuitive and spirit communication abilities to make decisions about the purchases of their homes there. They are both eager to share their memories of the earliest days of becoming homeowners in Lily Dale, a status that comes with responsibility but also a very specific identity within the community because of the strict

Figure 86. Griffith’s second Lily Dale home after renovation. Photo from Griffith’s photo collection. Reprinted with permission.
eligibility requirements that must be met prior to purchase. The common experience of buying a house with risk of not owning the land, and then renovating the structure creates a camaraderie that reinforces identity in the informal club of Lily Dale homeowners.

Shelley and Frank Takei (Figure 87), owners of the Angel House Guest House, are members of the homeowners club in a big way: Angel House is a three story Victorian structure with a basement (Figure 88). The first floor was already gutted and the second and third floors probably should have been, when they bought the home at auction for $1601 in 1994. It was an abandoned home that the Assembly had begun to gut and renovate as a guesthouse. The exact history is unclear, but the project was stopped after the first floor was torn out; the home sat empty for twenty years before the Takeis took

Figure 87. Shelley and Frank Takei. Provided by the Takeis.
over ownership. Like the Emmons, the Takeis are summer residents so their family photos are not in Lily Dale. Frank, an avid photographer, exposed and printed the black and white images contained in the album that holds their version of the Lily Dale renovation saga beginning with images of the house from all views, inside and out at the time they bought it and through the years of renovations. Shelley repeats several times that “it was a disaster, it was so much work, oh god” with incredulous laughter, saying that when she swept the front porch it was so rotted that pieces of the porch swept away with the dirt. She adds, “But we loved it. From day one we could see the potential in it.” Four years ago they opened Angel House as a guesthouse to visitors.
Frank, now a retired philosophy professor, did the majority of the renovation work. True to the characteristic style of a philosopher, he sits quietly on the floor studying the images, and comments that removing the six layers of wallpaper from the walls and ceiling of all the rooms on the second and third floors was an exercise in patience (Figure 89). Shelley had owned a home in Lily Dale for ten years prior to purchasing this one so she and Frank were good friends with many of the mediums in town, and as friends do, they dropped by regularly. Frank mentions that one of them, he can’t remember who, made the comment, “This is a busy house. And, oh, by the way, there is a woman who lives on the third floor and she would appreciate a rocking chair.” Frank continues, “So
we had a rocking chair back home and we brought it up and put it up on the third floor.

Subsequent to that I’ve seen nothing happen, but if she’s happy, I’m happy.”

Shelley laughs at an image in which she is bending over and kissing the behind of her
grown daughter, Nikki, who was getting a master’s degree in interior design at the time,
and therefore knew enough about house construction to keep the contractors in line
(Figure 90). Shelley recalls this story about their daughter and the contractors while

Frank chuckles through the entire narrative:

S: She . . . was 25 . . . and a lot of the contractors who were over here were her
age; they were from Cassadaga, which is one mile away, and they’d never been
in Lily Dale, never in their life, and they were afraid of Lily Dale. Because we
got this new contractor named Scott, . . . and he had this new business, and they
were doing the plumbing and electricity and things like that. They were cute,
and Nikki was friends with them. One of them was named Timmy . . . Timmy
in particular, [who] was from Cassadaga, . . . he was like “Oooooohhh, you

Figure 90. Shelley Takei and
daughter Nikki, from Takei photo
album of house renovations. Photo
Credit: Frank Takei. Reprinted with
permission.
know, I’ve never been over here; my parents told me never to come here.” And he [was] always watching with his eyes . . . So, what would happen is that they would be here all day working and then they would go home at five o’clock. Well, it would be light; we would come back and work after dinner. So if we knew they were going to drywall or something, like a wall, we would spray paint it . . . and we would say things like “GET OUT TIMMY . . . DEMON SEED!” We’d write terrible things on the wall all the time and Timmy would come in and . . . and Nikki would be like “Timmy, you better come in here.” . . . and he would come in and be like “OH MY GOD!” We would always do stuff to them [laughter from both Shelley and Frank].

M: Did she fess up? [laughter]

S: Oh yeah, of course we’d be laughing three minutes later . . . like Timmy, you dumb-ass, we painted this last night [laughter]. “Oh, man, oh, I was scared!” We’d make red paint run down the walls [laughter]. (2008)

The black and white images Frank and Shelley shared were photographs Frank had taken and printed in his darkroom. No photos of the walls that Shelley, Frank, and Nikki had painted with demon messages that frightened Timmy to his core were included in the album, yet looking at the monotone images brought back vivid memories of the pranks; not only was the memory resurrected but so was the laughter and jovial attitude regarding the fear outsiders have about Lily Dale. Lily Dale has a refreshing propensity to use outsiders’ perspectives to initiate their own entertainment. Whether it is merely a pun or a full-blown prank as perpetrated on Timmy, the town’s collective spiritual sense of humor is strong. The Takeis embody this light-hearted characteristic of the Lily Dale residents in what proved to be an irresistible demonstration of material behavior in their successful attempts to frighten an outsider. Using Jones’ measure that material behavior “refers to activity involved in producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world” (1997:202) the painted writing dripping down the wall was the focal point around which two separate and distinct behaviors emerged. First, the actions of the Takeis in painting a
message on the wall for Timmy created a “spirit bulletin board,” and therefore a physical
object. Their behavior in creating this object reveals their ability to enjoy, and even
delight in turning an outsiders’ view of their world into an opportunity to tease him with
the very same idea he was vulnerable to, but that was ridiculous to them. The second set
of material behaviors exhibited is seen in Timmy: his fear at being in Lily Dale and his
frightened reactions to the red dripping scrawl that the demon had written especially for
him. Timmy’s behaviors illustrate his susceptibility to suggestion in that he leapt to the
assumption that spirits were after him, rather than choosing the more believable prospect
that he was the butt of a joke. The fact that this stunt was perpetrated on him more than
once shows that his fear of Lily Dale was extraordinarily deep rooted, serving as an
example of the extreme reputation Lily Dale endures from outsiders even today.

Frank and Shelley claim to never have seen anything paranormal in the house, or
anywhere else, but they tell two stories to the contrary, and Shelley nonchalantly
mentions a third at a later time. First, anyone staying in The Goddess Room on the
second floor hears faint party sounds—Frank has heard them as well as many guests. In a
second example, the large framed picture hanging on the wall over the fireplace jumped
off the wall and dropped to the floor in much the same way the cast iron plate did at the
Emmons house. They look at each other and shrug, having no other explanation. Frank
wants to blame it on house vibrations of a natural kind. Shelley is not so sure; it was “just
too weird, the way it happened.” In denying having experienced spirit and then providing
their own exceptions, the Takeis are unique in their outlook regarding spirit. Neither
speaks of spirit as an integral part of existence, but they hold a shared understanding that
the universe is indeed bigger than what humans physically experience, that the physical
world is only a part of the picture. They live in a much more pragmatic state of mind than other contributors in that they analyze all aspects of academic approaches to the metaphysical, and they do it often with anyone who steps on to the porches of Angel House.

Neither Frank nor Shelley claim to have any mediumistic abilities and neither has seen spirit in their home, in spite of it being a “busy place,” other than the two exceptions they regularly admit to. Both have earned doctoral degrees in disciplines that promote and expect open-minded thought on human activity and an understanding of spiritual search. Shelley has a Ph.D. in Transpersonal Psychology and Women’s Studies and teaches at Atlantic University; Frank has a seminary degree, a Ph.D. in Western Philosophy, and continued studies in Eastern Philosophy and Religion; he retired after having spent decades teaching in multiple colleges and universities. They are open to a variety of viewpoints regarding paranormal phenomenon and understand that belief in a supernatural world can be fluid. Shelley promotes the frequent Angel House back porch discussions with ever-changing participants from all professions and belief foundations. These impromptu gatherings last into the late night and frequently into the morning hours, allowing ideas and concepts that cannot so easily be discussed outside of Lily Dale to flow freely. The Takeis have created an environment that nurtures exploration of topics that are considered taboo in more traditional academic settings. In these back porch sessions I’ve been told by more than one university faculty member that the level of conversational freedom and idea exchange in Lily Dale, and especially at the Angel House, is an indulgence they hesitate to partake in outside of Lily Dale for fear of peer ridicule and career jeopardy. Although this may be an exaggeration of possible outcome,
their expression of the need to withhold in academic circles outside Lily Dale is testament
to the reality of the environment in which they work, and is therefore noteworthy to
mention. These conversations are not limited to the higher educated, but include all who
are open-minded, well read, or curious to learn what others are researching, experiencing,
and witnessing in their lives both in and outside Lily Dale. The Takeis may have created
this environment more for themselves than their guests because they both have an
insatiable thirst for knowledge of the universal truths of which humans have been unable
to explain. By making their home the hub of related conversation, they feed their own
need for a dialog and growth along with those of their guests. Frank regularly offers to
review grad students’ thesis and dissertation drafts and Shelley has a mental list of book
titles for suggested reading on gender empowerment, epistemology, and psychology.
Their home might more aptly be called “Angel House University.”

Most of this was not learned about Frank and Shelley through their photograph album,
but through observation and conversation over the two summers I stayed with them. I
believe that the benefit they received when reminiscing about the renovation of their
home was the telling of the details of the journey they would not have otherwise thought
to speak of. Shelley mentioned at one point that she didn’t know why they had taken on
such a large project and others asked them if they were outright crazy for tackling
something so overwhelmingly difficult (Figures 91, 92). Barely within the same breath
she says that they loved it from the start and saw the potential; Frank whole-heartedly
agreed. Those statements provided an underlying permission to go into the good, bad, and
ugly of such a memory and still come out with a personal sense of satisfaction and
reaffirmation that the effort was worth it.
Figure 91. Pre-renovation of Takei home, from Takei photo album of house renovations. Photo Credit: Frank Takei. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 92. Takei Third Floor Alcove, from Takei photo album of house renovations. Photo Credit: Frank Takei. Reprinted with permission.
CONCLUSION

Lily Dale is a community made up of exceptionally eclectic personalities with two common bonds: Lily Dale itself and Spiritualism. Ray Taft refers to the “family” of Lily Dale, and most residents, whether year round, summer only, life-long, or transplanted exhibit a protective stance for Lily Dale when sharing memories. Within this commonality, many differences exist in the way the residents speak of their memories in and of Lily Dale and their lives in relationship to the town.

The first delineation addresses the difference in identification factors between the residents who grew up in Lily Dale and those who chose to move to Lily Dale as adults. Sara Chetkin, Jana Potter, Ted and Bill Rivers, and Raymond Taft are contributors discussed within this study who were either raised in Lily Dale or in the case of the Rivers, came as older teenagers and all were raised in the Spiritualist religion and lifestyle. Without exception, each speaks nostalgically during their memory recollections, although not necessarily for the same things: the wild abandon of childhood games, the wide proliferation of physical mediumship, and old-time mediums whose very presence defined the town. The choice of words, “It’s not the same” and “I wish I could still do that,” or a reflective tone of voice indicates that their memories instilled a desire to hop in a time machine to return to that memory, if for only a brief moment. Those who came to Lily Dale as adults, Charlie and Penelope Emmons, Connie Griffith, and Frank and Shelly Takei, are every bit as committed to Lily Dale but speak about it in a much more light-hearted, whimsical manner, with no sign of nostalgia in spite of the fact that each has been a part of Lily Dale for over thirty years. These “newcomers” each speak of
becoming homeowners as one of their primary memories; there are several possible reasons for this. First, since none of them live in Lily Dale year round (Griffith has in the past but does not now) they did not have a significant volume of photographs other than those of their house renovations of which to speak about. However, this may not be a significant factor when viewed in light of the fact that the volume of images viewed by those raised in Lily Dale does not correlate to the number of memories shared nor the length of their session; Chetkin is the only contributor in the “raised in Lily Dale” group who uses family images in any volume; the other three use community images or, in the case of the Rivers, a painting to stimulate their recollections. Yet, in every case the participants who were raised in Lily Dale demonstrate sentimentality for an earlier day while none of those who chose to move to Lily Dale do. Clearly an integral part of “newcomer” identity in Lily Dale, the acquiring of a house and subsequent renovations may have been a looming topic for this group even if no image had been available because of the fact that the choice to invest in Lily Dale is a conscious financial decision as well as a lifestyle choice made as an adult, making it of paramount importance in how they view themselves and their decision making process. Their house and its acquisition is a main event related to their relationship to the town; their commitment to the community does not embody familial ties, and further, puts a large financial risk on the table. This sheds a different light on how they view their identity within the community; it is not a birthright as in the case of life-long residents, but is a status hard-earned through multiple memberships, interviews, a commitment to Spiritualist beliefs, and a willingness to take on financial risks.

Contrasts can also be made in the types of memories shared by gender. The female
contributors, Sara Chetkin, Penelope Emmons, Jana Potter, Shelley Takei, and Connie Griffith, speak of personal anecdotes with detailed specifics such as names (Ozzie, Mommo, Timmy, Healing and Rainbow Trees), sensory details of the incident (green paint, red dripping paint, Mary-Jane shoes with buckles), narrative details (rotting floors, dowsing rod figures from $50 to $1000, barking dogs, throwing flour), and first person statements (“I felt I wanted to buy a place but I didn’t know for sure,” “I stepped up onto the table,” “I had forgotten about that,” “I really got it for that”). The male contributors, Ted and Bill Rivers, Raymond Taft, Charlie Emmons, and Frank Takei are less consistent in their delivery methods. Charlie Emmons speaks in a very similar manner to the female contributors in that he provides first person experiences with narrative details speaking in the moment of the incident, sharing his memories as if they are his alone, which they are. Frank Takei shares in a manner similar to Emmons but is much less vocal and prefers to listen to and laugh at Shelley’s descriptions rather than speak, although he does talk of his two supernatural incidences in the first person and with candor, as well as his “Zen” state of mind while stripping wallpaper. Taft and the Rivers, with the two exceptions of the tobacco incident and the protected coloring book, most often speak of their memories of others, or memories couched in third person rather than personal anecdotes. Rarely do they use the word “I” in the telling of a memory. These differences are indicative of gender communication styles, although I do not rule out the amount of time spent with the contributor prior to the session as a contributing influence. I met Chetkin and Potter (two females) and Taft and the Rivers brothers (three males) for the first time when we discussed the images; their memory sharing lines up with the gender characterization in that Chetkin and Potter speak a majority of the time about personal experiences, while
Taft and the Rivers speak mostly about historical and cultural issues, as well as other people. The remaining contributors discussed in this study, four females and two males, were known to me in a social context prior to my speaking with them about their images; each of them shared personal memory sketches as opposed to third person or general descriptions. Of the participants not outlined in this document, females shared personal details regardless of our prior relationship, and men shared only when I had met them socially prior to the photograph sharing session. The value of this information comes in the confirmation that prior social contact outside the research methodology may fertilize the contributions of study participants in the contexts of observer versus participant-observer models manifested in the field.

My original intent in choosing to study Lily Dale and its residents was to look at the ordinary memories of the less celebrated residents of a town riddled with historical scandal, decades of depression, and current-day dismissive attitudes towards their belief in spirit communication. I expected to find ordinary residents who lived under the radar of the more famous promulgators of spirit communication who give Lily Dale its reputation as “Spooksville.” I expected to find a difference between these two populations by using the casual snapshots of the local residents to jog memories of their experiences in Lily Dale, experiences outside the spirit extravaganza for which the town is known in order to better understand the larger population of the town. I expected to be able to identify memories that were independent of spirit, to analyze the ordinary citizen with a different measurement tool (personal snapshots) than the famous mediums who built the town, and later contributed to its decline, but that evidence did not exist. To the contrary, Lily Dale residents whether mediumistic or not, whether born and raised in
town or transplanted, whether in possession of family snapshots or community photo albums, all carry their religion and belief in the continuity of life within their essence. Spirit is part of the air Lily Dale residents breathe and therefore cannot be separated from the physical realm because in Lily Dale, spirit and physical reality are intertwined in such a way that extrication of one diminishes the other. A better understanding of the residents of Lily Dale can only be achieved by viewing the Spiritualist paradigm as a solution of salt and water, in which spirit (salt) is dissolved in the structure of their existence (water); spirit is ever-present and any other view is incomplete, inaccurate, and therefore invalid. It becomes simply a matter of walking in another’s shoes to fully understand their position.

This analogy supports the analysis of Spiritualist culture as material behavior in a unique way, beyond the examples discussed in which spirit manifests itself in paintings or floating trumpets. If material behavior is activity done in the production or response to anything within the physical dimension, then spirit, using the analogy of the salt-water solution, becomes a physical reality when melded with lives of Spiritualists, and as such identifies any interaction with spirit as also an interaction with the physical world, and therefore a material behavior, regardless of whether a physical manifestation of the spirit actually occurs. If the premise presented here is true, that Spiritualists live with spirit as a daily entity within their world and is therefore a part of their reality, then a better understanding of their culture can only be achieved by looking at their lives with spirit intact, rather than segregated and assigned to only the most celebrated of the population. Spirit belongs to everyone in Lily Dale, and they freely talk about it in their memory work, regardless of whether a painting, a community photograph or a personal snapshot
triggers the memory. The contribution of the participants in this study have given evidence that their ingratiation with spirit is deep-rooted and indelible and that the everyday lives of the ordinary residents of Lily Dale are not so different from the original founders of the town. In Lily Dale, ordinary does not mean without spirit or fundamental roots, but rather the exact opposite.

It is enticing to explore the notorious reputation of a town through pivotal events, central characters, and historical images, but the power of the individual stories of the residents who live in the shadow of such infamy is at times overlooked by academics and popular culture media, but most often by the townsfolk themselves. Susan Sontag writes, “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (1977:9). This observation holds true in Lily Dale; my requests to speak with residents about their photographs and memories were often met with surprise that their input was important, that the minutia of their lives would add value to the body of knowledge about Lily Dale. Nevertheless, once participants were in the active role of contributing, they became confident in that role, realizing the value of participating, first to themselves because of the pleasure they felt at returning to experiences of play, hard work, and everyday pleasures, and eventually to the larger understanding of Lily Dale’s culture. The latter was demonstrated in requests to meet again, suggestions for other contributors, and questions as to when the project would be complete and what form it would take. The value realized by Ted Rivers was long lasting; he volunteered, without my requesting, to contribute again by providing access to two more of his aunt’s paintings. All contributors were positive in their deliveries, representing the better aspects of their memories and
therefore Lily Dale. This gives evidence that no matter where a contributor falls in the spectrum of experience with the town, those who chose to speak of their relationship to it from a memory standpoint also chose to concentrate on the elements that keep them there. This willingness to share what they consider important to their own identity reinforces the structure of their relationship to the community, and therefore provides another perspective of the complex Lily Dale culture.

Most modern religions believe in an afterlife of one sort or another; however, the freedom with which humans have been able to form their own ideas and practice regarding the spirit realm has been either curtailed or promoted based in part on social structures of time and place. Spiritualism’s rise came about during a time of great religious freedom in America and a time of exploration within the sciences, initiating a quest to understand the invisible in scientific terms. From its inception Spiritualist practice was an example of material behavior in that all effort was put forth to produce physical manifestation of the spirit of deceased friends and relatives. Material behavior was at the core of every practice to produce physical evidence of spirit, which in turn would prove the validity of Spiritualist belief in the continuity of life after death. Overt physical spirit manifestations have been replaced with more acceptable forms of the physical such as mediums giving spoken messages from the deceased, and spiritual and physical healings. However, humans continue to be stimulated and fascinated with what is not visible and continue the search for physical proof of existence beyond what can be seen because comfort comes from earthly things: the physical world provides security.

The early attempts to provide comfort and the promise of redemption through the physicality of spirit in images made by Mumler and other photographers now constitute a
body of imagery that has transcended its original purpose: it is now considered an art form by photography collectors, and a distant remnant of early history by the Spiritualists. Like all other forms of physical manifestation of spirit, Lily Dale residents admit that many frauds existed who claimed to actualize spirit in photographs, but belief lingers that the true medium photographers were successful in capturing spirit images, in particular those of spirit guides. However, these images do not hold much interest for the Lily Dale residents outside of those committed to historical research and writing because the photographs do not show faces that are recognizable to them. Instead, residents are more interested in the older images of buildings, Inspiration Stump, individual homes and streets, the lakes, and the several versions of gates that have been erected and replaced since 1879; they recognize these structures and natural landscapes and therefore have their own personal memories associated with them. This holds true for modern supernatural photographs as well; although visitors to Lily Dale are regularly attempting to capture orbs at Inspiration Stump at midnight as well as other “hot spots” around town, most residents show little interest in the activity other than a handful who like to compare notes and images across the museum table. An exception to this is when a resident captures something unexpected on film in the course of everyday photographing; Charlie Emmons was quite convinced he captured something out of the ordinary in his image of Penelope the day after her mother had passed away. He did not seek to photograph spirit, but was taking snapshots at his sister’s wedding celebration, when something he speculates is spirit showed up on the film. In that context it is an everyday snapshot because he was not searching for evidence of spirit, but rather it was a development as a result of his normal activity.
The juxtaposition of the controversial metaphysical photographs with the everyday snapshots is notable in that it is the “mundane” images viewed by the residents that give rise to the mention of personal experiences with spirit by every contributor to this study. Spirit photographs are hanging in every public building in Lily Dale, but these were not the images that inspired discussion of childhood séances, healing trees, and laughable “fright night” simulations. Rather the images of piled snow, dilapidated houses, and old friends provided the vehicle to capture the essence of the Lily Dale residents, speaking about their own lives and their own spirits, outside the historical hysteria and modern pop culture that envelopes them.

Lily Dale stands apart in its cultural significance when studying the modern Spiritualist religion. In spite of illustrious beginnings, it is a relatively poor, yet viable community whose sole mission remains the education and practice of Spiritualist belief. Lily Dale and its residents have weathered booms, depressions, scandals, attacks both physical and in the media. They embraced the Women’s Rights Movement, playing an instrumental role in bringing the voices of women to the forefront, the remnants of which still exist in the annual Women’s Day Weekend and the large museum collection of photographs and documents from the early suffrage advocate’s meetings that took place on its grounds. They have lost children, husbands, and fathers in wars, and rows of houses and entire households to fire, and have eased millions of mourning hearts through healings and spirit messages from the ethereal plane over the last hundred plus years. They’ve experienced the more mundane such as walks in the woods in solitude, beach parties, green dogs, and diving games in the lakes intermixed with dead souls requesting rocking chairs, cigarette smoking 17th century painters, and the knowledge that their
dearly departed are still with them. For a Lily Dale resident, it is the collection of all of these moments in their entirety that populate the matrix of their identity as individuals and members of their unique village.
NOTES

1. There can be confusion in the use of the three words *spiritualism*, *Spiritualism*, and *Spiritualist*. Most scholarly works published on the subject use the word *spiritualism*, lower case, for the general beliefs regarding the existence of an afterlife and communication with the spirit of the dead beginning many centuries prior to the nineteenth-century through today. In contrast, *Spiritualism*, capitalized, refers to the modern movement and subsequent religion begun in the nineteen-century and still practiced today that encompasses those beliefs developed to communicate with the dead through mediums. *Spiritualist* refers to the formal organization of the National Association of Spiritualist Churches along with other similar organizations and their associated chapters. The word *modern* is used with the two latter terms to emphasize the limited scope of the discussion to the time period beginning with the nineteenth-century development through the current day.

2. Ectoplasm is the materialization of spirit often described as exuding from medium’s bodies, but has also been described appearing without a spirit medium present. It sometimes takes the form of a wet gauze-like film, fleshy organs, or gooey gel-like substance.

3. Although all interviewees agreed to share their personal photographs for our interview, some were ultimately unprepared to do so; in these instances alternative images, and in one case a painting, were used as the visual stimulus. In these instances, I have discussed the situation in detail in the text.

4. The use of Jones’ material behavior theory in the context described was discussed with him on October 24, 2009 in Boise, ID at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting. He agreed that the application of his Material Behavior principle in this context is most appropriate and in line with his concepts (Jones, 2009).


6. Thomas Edison wrote at length in his diary on four separate occasions between 1920-1922 regarding his thoughts on spiritualism and spirit communication and his own plans to build an apparatus to communicate with spirit, if it did exist. He considered the “unscientific nonsense” of the medium spirit manifestations and the myriad of apparatus that had been developed to measure spirit activity “absurd” and is very careful to say that he does not believe that spirits exist. He mentions that he has been working on the plans for three variations of a machine that if spirit did exist, would measure it, and in fact he was in the process of manufacturing such a device and hoped it would be successful. Below is an excerpt from his diary dated X-30-1920:
I cannot conceive of such a thing as spirit. Imagine something that has no weight, no material form, no mass; in a word, imagine nothing. I cannot be a party to the belief that spirits exist and can be seen under certain circumstances, and can be made to tilt tables and rap chairs and do other things of a similar and unimportant nature. The whole thing is absurd.

I have been thinking for some time of a machine or apparatus which could be operated by personalities which have passed on to another existence or sphere. Now follow me carefully: I don’t claim that our personalities pass on to another existence or sphere. I don’t claim anything because I don’t know anything about the subject. But I do claim that it is possible to construct an apparatus which will be so delicate that if there are personalities in another existence or sphere who wish to get in touch with us in this existence or sphere, this apparatus will at least give them a better opportunity to express themselves than the tilting tables and raps and ouiji boards and mediums and the other crude methods now purported to be the only means of communication. . . .

. . . The whole business seems so childish to me that I frankly cannot give it any serious consideration. I believe that if we are to make any real progress in psychic investigation, we must do it with scientific apparatus and in a scientific manner just as we do in medicine, electricity, chemistry, and other fields.

Now what I propose to do is to furnish psychic investigators with an apparatus which will give a scientific aspect to their work. This apparatus, let me explain, is in the nature of a valve, so to speak. That is to say, the slightest conceivable effort is made to exert many times its initial power for indicative purposes . . . Beyond that I don’t care to say anything further regarding its nature. I have been working out the details for some time; indeed, a collaborator in this work died only the other day. In that he knew exactly what I am after in this work, I believe he ought to be the first to use it if he is able to do so (Runes 1948:232).

7. Universalism differed from other Christian churches in that it rejected the damning fires of eternal hell and embraced the notion that all souls could expect a forever-blissful afterlife (Buescher 2004:128).

8. Mesmerism refers to a group of practices involving the special abilities of persons to induce a trance-like state in another. It was first practiced by German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (May 23 1734–March 5, 1815) and later refined into the more modern practice of hypnosis.

9. This date is the evening prior to April Fools’ Day and was deliberately chosen by the Fox sisters for this reason (Stuart 2005:5-6).


11. Ann Braude in Radical Spirits describes a different scenario in which Isaac Post, friend of the Fox family, created the alphabet code after Katy and Maggie move to Rochester to live with Leah.

12. After the Civil War the abolitionists turned their attention to gaining the right to vote for former slaves. Following this lead, the women’s rights movement was renamed the Women’s Suffrage Movement in order to focus their reform on voting rights above
the other issues previously promoted, with the assumption that by gaining the right to vote women could affect change in all civil areas.

13. Early Spiritualist trance mediums, usually on a stage or public platforms, put themselves in a self-induced trance state and then spoke in the voice of the spirit wishing to communicate through them. This allowed women to speak in a public arena, otherwise forbidden by society, because the voice and message was not theirs, but rather of a spirit teacher. Although most trance mediums were women, some men also performed this function, the most prominent being Andrew Jackson Davis, founder of the Lyceum Spiritualist educational system still in existence today.


15. For a complete description of Dr. Hare’s Spiritual Telegraph see Leonard 2005, Appendix J, p. 277.

16. Postmortem images became important to Americans at this time for several reasons. First, many children died young from disease, providing little time to have an image made of them. Without the convenience afforded later generations by hand held cameras, nineteenth century families relied on the availability of a professional to make their family images, and many times the child had already died by the time the photographer arrived. Secondly, death had not yet been cleansed from the common psyche so death imagery was not gruesome but rather something to be shared (Ruby 1995).

17. An orb is a transparent white circular appearance on a photograph most often described as the flash bouncing off a particle of dust. Many believers in spirit identify them as manifestations of a spirit entity and often will find facial and body images within the texture of the circle.

18. One who induces hypnosis or trance states in others.

19. The original name was “The Cassadaga Lake Free Association.” In 1903 it was changed to “The City of Lights” and in 1906 was again renamed to “The Lily Dale Assembly.”

20. The Women’s Suffrage Day is still in existence in Lily Dale under the name of Women’s Day. This event celebrates the early Victorian days of Lily Dale with participants donning period costumes, public séance circles, historical food offerings, and Spiritualist lectures.

21. Spiritualism created many strange bedfellows with Houdini and Doyle amongst the most interesting. Their friendship began when Houdini, impressed by Doyle’s literary intellect, sent him a copy of his book *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*. Doyle responded with a thank you, mentioning surprise at Houdini’s suspicions of The Davenport Brothers, well-known mediums of the time. They remained friends for four years through periodic visits and regular correspondence about Spiritualism, all the while each investigating the religion independently of each other and coming to opposite conclusions. Their letters are filled with testimonies of experiences written in attempts to sway the other to the proper side of the debate. Their friendship ended when a séance arranged for Houdini by Doyle, with Lady Doyle acting as medium, did not convince him they had contacted his mother. Doyle stopped all communication in spite of Houdini’s
several attempts to explain his viewpoint. The relationship deteriorated into a public argument in the media; they never communicated again (Polidoro 2001).

22. The Morris Pratt Institute is a distance Spiritualist educational institution, providing medium training online and through mail correspondence. It was formerly Fred’s Restaurant.

23. West is credited with telling anecdotes of Kelly appearing on her sofa after his death on more than one occasion, most often in a tuxedo.

24. Lily Dale does not have a human cemetery; however, some suspect that ashes of long-deceased mediums are buried under the stones at Inspiration Stump. The neighboring town of Fredonia has a quite large and expansive cemetery, which holds the graves of many of Lily Dale’s founding members.

25. “Sweet light” is a term used for the periods of the day shortly after the first hint of sunrise and before the last at sunset, when the light from the sun is at a very low angle, providing soft light and shadows, thus the most beautiful light for photographing landscapes and people.

26. The aged document typed in all capital letters on a manual typewriter that hangs adjacent to Fancher’s curtains reads:

June, 1973

Embroidered Portieres by Miss Mollie Fancher—An Instrument for Spirit. This unusual and beautiful handiwork is a remarkable demonstration of the power of spirit. It was completed through the instrumentality of Miss Mollie Fancher while in a trance condition.

In her early years, Miss Fancher suffered a severe accident which resulted in a development of inflammation of the lungs, paralysis, blindness, periods of deafness, loss of speech, then spasms, followed by a trance condition. Except for the region of the heart, her body became entirely cold, all natural bodily functions ceased and often no pulse was felt. During the nine (9) years she was in trance, her right arm was so rigidly bend that her hand was fixed over the back of her head.

Despite all these afflictions, however, Mollie was able to make the most beautiful minute patterns of embroidery, monograms on silk, and fine work such as cutting flowers and leaves in an ingenious manner. In addition to this intricate embroidery, she also wrote more than 6500 letters to help, comfort and inspire persons in many walks of life.

When the trance ended, Mollie knew it was not herself—not Mollie Fancher—who had performed all that work and written all those letters for she had great difficulty even in holding a pen or pencil and the handwriting certainly was not her own. Spirits who controlled her body had done the work.
Truly Miss Fancher was a selfless instrument of spirit, one who—because of her many afflictions—succeeded in astounding and confounding the psychic and medical worlds. During those nine (9) years of trance, she astonished doctors by taking no food or drink. Mollie’s aunt urged her to eat to maintain life. Her reply, however, was: “I receive nourishment from a source (spiritual) of which you are all ignorant.”

Admitting failure in accounting for Miss Fancher’s remarkable accomplishments under her handicapped condition, leading physicians called her “the Brooklyn Enigma.”

After nine (9) years, Mollie awakened from her trance but remained bedridden for the rest of her life. Among the many mystics and clairvoyants of our age, few had such a strange life as Miss Fancher. What could have been considered a tragic and lonely life became instead a blessed and useful existence and inspired countless numbers.

The only other set of Miss Fancher’s Portieres, similar to these but of different design, is exhibited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

27. One of many exceptions to this is the ability of Nagy to “bend spoons,” an activity in which spoons reshape as if made of putty through a process of directing energy through the body of the person holding the utensil. Nagy teaches a spoon-bending workshop during the camp season but will not do it in the museum, as it becomes a distraction and sideshow reminiscent of the days of physical manifestation that wrought earlier havoc in the town.

28. I have first hand knowledge of three instances in which historical family snapshots were thrown away because they held no value to the owner. In addition, a new trend I have observed on Internet blogs is to buy photo albums of unidentified family snapshots and post the images accompanied by a fictional humorous narrative.

29. Two mediums are among my contributors; only one is registered to practice in Lily Dale. Neither of these mediums have been involved in the more visible media productions or newspaper accounts. However, they have been interviewed at various times. We became acquainted as friends first, after which they joined the study.

30. I have personally observed my parents, an aunt and uncle, as well as several friends, all who have lost children between the ages of 8 and 16, find a way to have happiness by allowing their grief to reside, however temporarily, somewhere other than in the present moment.

31. Ozzie is a fictitious name. The person Potter speaks of chose not to participate in my research due to privacy concerns.

32. Ted is 6 years older than Bill, which may explain why he witnessed trance painting and Bill did not. Both moved to Lily Dale in 1962, when Bill was 16 and Ted was 22. They had visited over the summers prior to moving to town.
33. The making of an image with a digital camera is a material behavior, with the resulting object in the form of digital particles of information stored on a chip that must be considered the image itself, in the same way that exposure of light sensitive film is the object: both can be made into a print that can live in the world as an object to be passed around and viewed by many. In the digital age, there is a case to be made that all digital information is an object, whether materialized or not, because of its physical location on hardware, and because of (and in spite of) its virtual proliferation across data networks around the world and in some cases outside the earth sphere when considering communication with astronauts and space travel equipment.

34. Using an object to connect to the owner of the object or to the person who made it is a common occurrence in Lily Dale, according to Taft.

35. The School of Healing and Prophesy is located at and accredited by the Fellowship of the Spirit, a Spiritualist educational organization founded in 1989 in Lily Dale. It has since moved, due to space constraints, to a larger location just outside the Lily Dale gates.

36. Penelope Emmons, like a few other mediums in Lily Dale, has another profession from which she earns income, and therefore does not choose to give readings for fees but instead, as gifts as she sees fit.

37. Since they spend the majority of their time in Pennsylvania, most of their personal photographs are not in Lily Dale. This turned out to be a common situation for those people who winter in other locations.

38. Neil Rzepkowski is a long-time resident of Lily Dale, a practicing family medicine physician, and a registered medium in Lily Dale.

39. Penelope, shortly after they moved into the house, moved this chair upstairs to the guest bedroom. About the same time, her adult daughter visited, staying in that bedroom and awoke in the middle of the night to see the chair rocking of its own accord; she now refuses to stay in the room. Upon hearing this, Charlie spent an entire night watching the chair not rock. To pass the time he wrote a poem entitled “Charlie’s Rockin’ Chair” that a friend put to music. He does not have a copy.

40. Most houses in Lily Dale do not have basements because they were built as summer homes. The Takei’s basement is a four-foot thick stone wall foundation.
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Potter, Jana. Personal interview conducted August, 2008.


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Takei, Shelley and Frank. Personal interview conducted August, 2008.


Lily Dale Street Map. Reprinted by permission, Lily Dale Assembly.