

CHAPTER XI

SPIRITUALISM

Someone has described man as a "worshiping animal." Wherever he has left the ashes of his campfire, he has also left some indication of a belief in the supernatural. Even those who claim to be atheists, have, for all practical purposes, deified time. Everything which the believer explains by God, the atheist explains by billions of years.

Someone else has suggested that the only atheist who can be intellectually honest, is the person who knows everything. Once someone admits that they do not know everything, they are also forced to acknowledge that God may exist in the area of their ignorance.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that the people of Liberal would seek the supernatural. This hunger for God, manifested itself in various forms of spiritualism.

Walsler, himself, became a promoter of spiritualism. J.P. Moore refers to a discourse he delivered on "The Chemical Laboratory of the Soul." These remarks were given at the funeral of Mrs. John Becker in the "Spiritualist Hall." He said: "The discourse was esoteric, as the Hindoo would say; that is, no one but the initiated could understand it. In the course of his talk, Mr. Walsler told of being present on three occasions when the deceased and he, himself, had communicated with the spirit of her departed son."

Moore wrote that the Spiritualist Science Association of Liberal, was formed and incorporated in 1889. He quotes from "The Encyclopedia of Death and Life in the Spirit World," that "modern spiritualism originated with the three Fox sisters at Hydesville, N.Y. in 1848."

It is my personal belief that this type of spiritualism has been around since Eden, and that it has manifested itself in every generation. Today, the same, or similar notions are a part of the "New Age" religion.

It seems that G.H. Walsler was in the process of spiritual growth and development. He once wrote: "As a Freethinker, I wandered into the field of Materialism, Atheism,

Agnosticism, and finally Spiritualism . . ." The death of Walser's third wife, Alice, no doubt helped him to see the weakness, and inadequacy, of spiritualism. I like to think that his interest in spiritual things was at least a step in the right direction. I pray that his spiritual pilgrimage ultimately brought him to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Fortunately, God will sort out all such matters in due time.

It is a fact of history, however, that there was a spiritualist group in Liberal, and that they hosted meetings for people from all over the country. J.P. Moore's grandfather, John S. Hatten, was a spiritualist. Moore attended at least two of their encampments. The first he attended was in 1896, before moving to Liberal. The second in 1899, when he helped operate a refreshment stand. Moore said the 1899 meeting was the "seventh and last encampment." He also said that: "Mr. Walser was an ardent believer, and it was mostly through his efforts and because of his willingness to assume most of the expense that these big meetings were made possible."

The fact that these "spiritualist encampments" ceased to be sponsored by Walser, may well be an indication of the spiritual changes taking place in his own life.

The Death of Alice Walser

As I said earlier, the death of Walser's wife, Alice, may have also helped him abandon spiritualism.

Perhaps I should take time to explain that Walser's second wife, Hannah, divorced him on June 25, 1895. The divorce decree granted her \$3,600 cash, and an allowance of \$25 per month. Walser had fallen in love with a Mrs. Alice Martha Newman. This, no doubt, did not help his marriage to Hanna. Moore described Alice as "a brilliant and beautiful woman, thirty-seven years younger than Mr. Walser." Then added: "They were married in about 1894 . . ."

Since I have a copy of Hannah's divorce decree, dated June 25, 1895, I know he could not have been married to Alice in 1894. I mention these dates, however, to provide insight into what was going on in Walser's life. He was either seeing Alice while married to Hannah, or shortly thereafter. It is safe to say there was not much time between his second divorce, and his third marriage.

Walser's grandiose dream of a liberal paradise had failed. Both his bank account, and his ability to make money were diminishing. Liberal's problems were compounded by

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a disastrous fire on November 4, 1897. Nine businesses on the west side of Main Street were destroyed. Walser said he had seen the errors of materialism, atheism, and agnosticism. His recognition of spiritual reality may have been part of his attraction to the beautiful and brilliant Alice Newman. She was a spiritualist medium and lecturer, and became his wife.

It must have been quite devastating to Walser when Alice died by suicide. Her approach to spiritual reality contained a fatal flaw. It obviously did not bring fulfillment. She became neurotic, addicted to drugs, and mentally ill. She took a fatal dose of poison July 14, 1902. By her own request, she was buried at midnight. Her grave was initially beneath the trees about seventy feet from the Walser home. In 1940, her remains were moved to make way for a coal mine.

Surely, the death of Alice Walser must have had an impact upon her husband. He had tried atheism, agnosticism, materialism, liberalism, and spiritualism. He was sixty-eight years old at the time of her death. His health was failing. He was in a search for something, or someone, that would bring meaning and fulfillment to his life. Everything he had tried, so far, however, had failed.

A Spiritualist Hoax Exposed

I cannot leave the subject of spiritualism, without recounting the comical account of the way a spiritualist hoax was exposed. It happened in the spring of 1887, near the beginning of the spiritualist movement in Liberal.

The standard price for a spiritual encounter was one dollar. At the time, however, this was a considerable amount of money. For your dollar you could have your fortune told, see objects move, receive spirit writing, see spirit photography, etc.

One poor soul named Wiggins, traveled all the way from New York to have a seance with his departed mother. When she "appeared," she seemed to have on the very dress she had worn the day before her death. The old man was overcome with emotion, and wanted to hug and kiss her. He was restrained from doing so, however, and warned that any attempt at physical contact would break the "en rapport" of the circle and cause the spirit of his mother to vanish.

In reality, poor old Mr. Wiggins would have been kissing Wylie S. VanCamp. Wylie was a Freethinker, and one of the town drunks. He conspired with J.H. Roberts and Dr.

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Bouton to take advantage of the spiritual hunger in Liberal, and scam their fellow citizens. VanCamp was the smallest of the three, so he operated in the attic. He was also a good penman and skilled at free hand drawing.

Their seance business was rudely interrupted by an untimely fire. When volunteer firemen chopped a hole in the roof, they discovered the cache of paraphernalia which made the "spirit manifestations" possible.

The perpetrators of the fraud, however, were unrepentant. The arrogant Dr. Bouton felt that his deception had provided an "answer" to what many people were looking for at a very reasonable cost. He even capitalized on the seances after the hoax was discovered. He published a pamphlet, revealing in detail his techniques, and explaining how easy it was to fool people.

It seems, however, to Walser's credit, that he did genuinely believe in spiritualism. He was apparently not in it for the money.

Jesus said that the truth would make you free. Sometimes, however, the truth first makes us miserable.