



The Voice Box

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Spirit Photography.

The actual practice of attempting to capture ghost's on film date back nearly a century and a half to around 1861. Not surprisingly this type of photography was seen to be controversial and the subject of much debate ever since.

It appears that the general lack of acceptance of the credibility of spirit photographs dates back to the past where it was riddled with fraud. Strangely though, it is spirit photography that seems to provide the most scientific evidence of ghosts. With the advent of advanced photographic methods it has become easier to capture the ghostly image.

Spirit photography in the old days seemed to be the effect of radiation of some sort, on photosensitive film. Such results continued today all though, gone have the glass plate which the photographer had to prepare with a coating of collodion (gun cotton dissolved in the ether) containing iodide of potassium. They would then sensitise it by dipping it into a bath of silver nitrate. They would then take a photograph whilst the plate was still wet.

Today we take photography for granted by simply loading the film into a camera and snapping a picture. Thanks to advances in film, cameras and technology over the last several decades, it maybe that the controversial science of spirit photography is finally coming to an age of understanding.

It is still unfortunate however that spirit photography of today has been greatly damaged by the reputation of the fraudulent photographers of the past, and the bad name that pertains to them, so making it very difficult for today's ghost hunter to be taken seriously. Just a mention of spirit photography conjures up images of days gone by, a period that was plagued with questionable methods and often humorous results.

All photographs of the past could not have been faked. It is said that spirit photography was first produced by accident and that what had happened,

brought unscrupulous photographers to the realisation of the wealth to be made. From then, the first fraudulent images were produced and the fakes muddied the waters for the many genuine photographs.

The very first spirit photograph had long been erroneously credited to William Mumler, a Boston engraver in 1861. But as it happens he was not the first to take a photograph that would later be deemed as unexplainable. This bizarre event actually occurred just one year before, when a photographer W Campbell was taking a test photograph of an empty chair, and while there was no one else in the studio at the time, the developed plate showed the image of a small boy. Campbell was never able to reproduce any more photographs of this nature and so it was not until the following year when the history of spirit photography really began and Campbell faded from the memory.

William Mumler therefore, an experienced and enthusiastic amateur photographer with a studio on Washington Street took experimental self portraits of himself. Whilst developing these plates he noticed that one showed the image of a young female standing next to him. As he examined the picture, he recognised the figure as that of a cousin who had died 12 years earlier. He later recalled that while posing for the photograph, he had experienced a strange trembling sensation at his right arm that left him feeling exhausted.

The photograph attracted a great deal of interest and came about during the expansion of the spiritualist movement. Needless to say it was investigated by both spiritualist and professional photographers of the day. William Black, a leading Boston photographer and inventor of the acid nitrate bath was one of the professional photographers who investigated Mumler and his methods. He attended a sitting in Mumler's studio and whilst there carefully examined his camera. He also went on to examine the prepared dip and bath and even kept his eyes on the plate from the moment its preparation began, until it was sensitised and locked into the dark slide. After his portrait had been taken, Black removed it from the camera and took it to the darkroom himself where it was developed, he saw the figure of a man leaning over his shoulder, he had no explanation for his appearance.

Although he had not previously been interested in Spirit's or Spiritualism, Mumler soon began to describe him as a medium for taking spirit photographs, and although the spirit extras were often unrecognisable and blurred, in many of the cases there would be distinct likeness of deceased family members and friends. Even the testimony of New York's Supreme Court Judge, John Edmonds, who had gone to see Mumler, convinced that he was a fraud but left convinced that he could actually produce psychic photographs, failed to quiet the critics and the non-believers. Mumler finally left Boston and moved to New York in 1869, where he opened a new studio and charged as much as \$10 per photograph.

The studio began to be frequented by wealthy and influential patrons. Although many of the photos he produced were undistinguishable, on one occasion at least, he produced a recognisable (and some believe amazing) spirit portrait of Abraham Lincoln. This happened when a lady who was heavily veiled and wearing a black dress gave her name as a Mrs Tydall. She wore a crepe veil that was so thick it was impossible to distinguish a single feature of her face. Mumler asked if she intended having her picture taken with her veil, she replied, when you're ready, I will remove it. I said I am ready, upon which she removed the veil and the picture was taken. It was only when Mumler saw the developed print that he realised the sitter had been Mary Cobb Lincoln, for behind her stood the smiling image of Abraham Lincoln himself. This particular photograph had been distributed widely over the years and while some have expressed amazement at it, most feel that it is likely a clever hoax.

Many modern researchers believe that Mumler may have actually captured something genuine in some of his photographs, however, a love of money was just too big a temptation for him and he supplemented his authentic photos with fraudulent ones in order to pay the rent.

Soon the other photographers both amateur and professional began to come forward and they also called themselves " mediums " claiming the ability to take dead apparitional photographs. Spirit photography soon became a popular pastime and literally thousands of dollars were made from those who came to have their portraits taken. One photographer, William Hope, claimed to take more than 2500 spirit photographs during a period of about two decades. Few of these photographs appear to be authentic.

Hope was born in Crewe, England in 1863, and as a young man went to work as a carpenter. His talent for capturing the spirit in photographs allegedly came about around 1905 when he and a friend were taking turns photographing one another. In a photograph that was taken by Hope, there was an 'extra', the image of a person who was not physically present when the photo was taken. As it turned out, the extra in question was the deceased's sister of the photographs subject. Not long afterwards a circle was formed by a group of six people and they became renowned as the Crewe Circle.

Ironically, Hopes first brush with exposure as a fraud came when Archbishop Colley arranged his first sitting. According to the story, Hope doctored the photograph with the wrong spirit extra, substituting another elderly woman for Colley's mother. When Hope tried to confess his fraud to Colley, the other man dismissed his confession as nonsense. Saying he would recognise his mother when he saw her and the extra in a photograph was certainly his mother. To prove his case, he even put a notice in the local newspaper and asked all of those who remembered his mother should call at the Rectory. No fewer than 18 people selected Hopes mistake from among several others and said that it definitely showed the ghost of the late Mrs Colley.

In February 1922, Hope was almost exposed again but this time, the attempt almost backfired on the accuser and there re-mains some questions about the incident to this day. By this time, Hope moved to London and had established him self as a professional medium. The Society for Physical Research (SPR) decided to investigate Hope's claims and sent a new member, Harry Price, to look into it. Price had a good working knowledge of conjuring and would later make a name for himself as one of Britain's leading ghost hunters. During the investigation, Price claimed to detect evidence of trickery by Hope but questions arose as to whether it was Price, and not Hope, who had tampered with the photographic plate.

Price claims to have attended one séance and marked two plates that Hope was to use with 12 needle marks and also provided him with two other plates that he had had made up by The Imperial Dry Plate Company and they had put their trade mark onto them. These plates were handed to Hope, Price claimed to have watched him switch one of the plates but said nothing until the plats had been processed for fear that if he was challenged at that time he would destroy Price's evidence.

In the May issue of the Journal of the London SPR, Price published a report under the title "Cold Light on Spiritualistic Phenomena". Immediately, he was attacked from the Spiritualist camp. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who was a supporter of the Crewe Circle, denounced Price and his methods. Spiritualist newspapers accused him of trickery and of switching the plates himself with the intent to discredit the medium.

Sir Oliver Lodge who believed that Price was a fraud backed Harry Price believing that his proof of Hope's fraud could not be more complete. Even though Hope had many detractors of his Mediumship, he had many supporters also, including Conan-Doyle.

Conan Doyle wrote a book in response to Price's report called "The Case for Spirit Photography". Hope was also supported by Sir William Crookes and Sir William Barrett although many suspected that fraud was involved in the Crookes' sitting, who was in his eighties at the time of the sitting and had only recently lost his wife. Hope's assistant at the time told Crookes biographer that the negative from which Hopes photograph of Lady Crookes was reproduced showed clear signs of double exposure but that Crookes proffered to ignore the fact.

Hope's career gained support from many quarters and some unquestionable results were obtained especially in the case of the Reverend Arthur Tweedale who owned a haunted house in the town of Otley in Yorkshire. In his book, Rev Tweedale dealt with the subject of survival after death, were Hope's prowess as a Spirit Photographer was figured prominently.

People called upon Hope unannounced in disguise and using secret identities. One case was that of Mrs Hortense Levenson who came to Hope and was given a psychic photograph of her late husband, Major Levenson, who had been on the staff of the War Office. She was absolutely convinced that the photograph was that of her late husband and that the photograph was genuine.

William Hope died on March 7, 1933, leaving many mysteries behind him. Was he real, or was he a fraud? Nobody can be sure and so, like many others who have gone before him accused of fraud, the William Hope controversy will have to remain "Unsolved".

Information:

Nandor Fodor – Encyclopaedia of Physic Science
The Haunted Museum