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Light and Dark Sides of Spiritualism: The Eddy Brothers and the Shakers

Christian Goodwillie



Elder Henry C. Blinn

In his 1899 work *Manifestation of Spiritualism Among the Shakers* Elder Henry Blinn reflected on the marvelous events that dominated life in Shaker communities from 1837 into the 1850s. Blinn lived through the entire period as a faithful Shaker, and as a printer he published newly received communications from God, Holy Mother Wisdom, and Mother Ann Lee. An active participant in what the Shakers called the “New Era,” or “Mother’s Work,” Blinn was optimistic that the countless spirits interacting with members of Shaker communities could reenergize and facilitate the progress of his millennial church. Looking back on these events fifty years later Blinn realized that what the Shakers experienced was but a precursor to the popular movement called Spiritualism that swept America and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, whereas the

Shakers' experience with the spirits was primarily centered on engendering obedience, humility, and sharing simple gifts of love and spiritual objects, the non-Shaker Spiritualist movement comprised a wider array of purposes and experiences, and impacted huge numbers of people in many different ways. Blinn viewed Shaker spiritual practice as rooted in the body of the Shaker church, which constituted the living body of the second appearing of the Christ spirit on earth. As he wrote: "‘I am the way and the light,’ said Jesus, and it is in this light of the Christ life, that all spiritual influences should be tested." Blinn also claimed that the "curiosities of spirit materialization" never become a phase of Shaker Spiritualism.¹ Blinn's fellow Shaker Frederick W. Evans would have disagreed with this statement since he was converted by a spiritual manifestation he experienced at New Lebanon, New York, and was an ardent public champion of the phenomenon.² In fact, the experience of the Shakers as progenitors of, and then participants in, the Spiritualist movement, is far more complex than Blinn's retrospective stated. This article will examine one dimension of that experience—the interaction of individual Shakers with the notorious Vermont mediums, the Eddy Brothers. This interesting episode in Shaker history involved both Blinn and Evans, as well as many other Shakers. The Shakers relationship with the Eddys provides substantial evidence of their attitude toward the Spiritualist movement as it evolved beyond the realm of the Shaker communities.

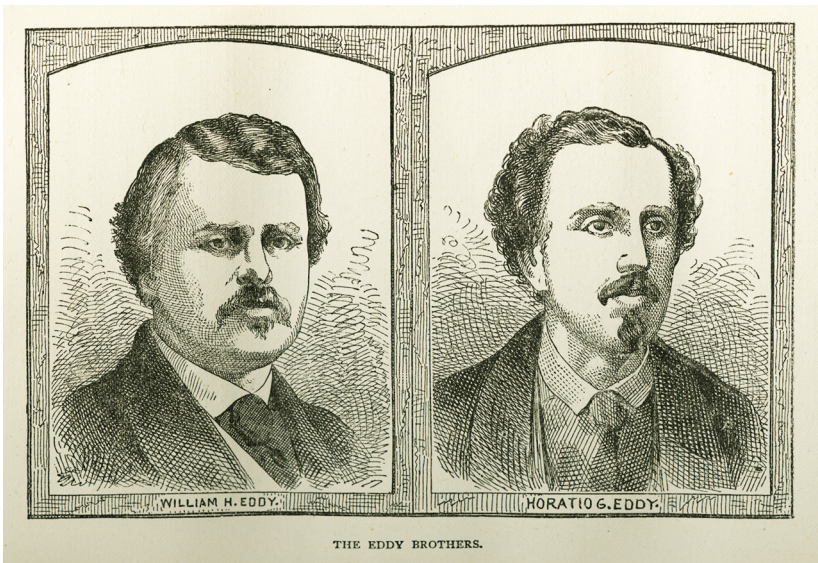


Elder Frederick W. Evans

Elder Frederick Evans emerged—for better or for worse—as *the* public voice of the Shaker movement during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He broadcast his strident advocacy of many causes, including Spiritualism, far and wide at public events and through pamphlets and newspapers. At the Shaker Convention held at New York’s Steinway Hall on Sunday, November 22, 1874, Evans staked the Shakers’ claim as the nursery of Spiritualism, declaring that “spiritualistic phenomena of a peculiar and striking character appeared in the Mount Lebanon society eleven years before the Rochester rappings, and they had fully developed mediums before the Fox girls were out of long-clothes.”³ The following day a reporter from the *Daily Graphic* interviewed Elder Evans at length about Spiritualism. Evans claimed to have defined Spiritualism as a science, and not a religion, at a meeting held in New York City in 1860. He believed that by classifying Spiritualism as a science it could be sheltered from the objections of religious critics. After recounting the advent of the Era of Manifestations in 1837 he discussed the inspired Shaker texts, *Holy, Sacred, and Divine Roll and Book* (1843) and *Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom* (1849). When the reporter inquired if he could obtain copies Evans replied “Nay ... we do not allow them to get into circulation now ... because they were published before we had learned to distinguish between different spirits. We learned by experience that the mere fact of being a spiritual manifestation does not prove that it is divine.” Evans described the Shakers’ progress through three phases of interaction with the spirits: an initial test phase wherein the reality of the manifestations was ascertained, a secondary judgment phase where spirits reproved and purified the Shakers, and a third missionary phase wherein enlightened Shakers served as missionaries to “lower spirits,” hearing their confessions in the same way they would have heard the confession of a person joining the sect. Through this process, according to Evans, many Shakers became spiritual mediums.⁴ After years of working with spirits in their own communities Shakers began to question the veracity of the entire phenomena. They viewed the advent of the Rochester rappings, therefore, with great relief. To confirm the work Shakers traveled to New York City to witness the Fox sisters, where overjoyed spirits greeted them.⁵

Evans told the reporter of the *Daily Graphic* that he first visited the Eddy brothers in early November 1874 with fellow Shaker John Greaves, a blacksmith born in England who had lived at New Lebanon’s North Family with Evans since at least 1850. Over the course of three nights Evans and

Greaves witnessed the apparition of nearly thirty spirits. Although the entities did not include Shakers, and Evans was not individually acquainted with any of them, he was able to converse with them and attested to the genuineness of what he observed. Finally, he stated that the rapid growth of the Spiritualist movement was the “descent of Spiritualism from the Shakers to the world. We had the manifestations first; but we kept quiet about it. But the spirits promised us that there should come a time of manifold spiritual revelations to the world, and here they are.”⁶ Ever the publicity hound, Evans followed up with the *New York Tribune*. In the December 26, 1874, issue he published a strong statement on behalf of the Shakers in support of Spiritualism, and the physical materialization of spirits, declaring “As an order of people, we, the Shakers, *do* have established connections ‘with the outlying ghostly world.’” Evans noted that he had studied Spiritualism since his conversion to Shakerism forty years prior, and acknowledged that “by it I was converted to Shakerism.” He deemed his experiences at the Eddys “to be as true and real—as genuine—as are any facts in agriculture or chemistry that I have ever witnessed. I fully realize the responsibility I assume with this statement.”⁷ Evans’s strong public stance begs the question: why did a Shaker elder and practicing Spiritualist of many years’ experience feel the need to travel to Vermont to interact with the spirits? And, who were the controversial Eddy brothers?





Henry Steel Olcott

William Eddy and his brother Horatio G. Eddy lived in rural Chittenden, Vermont (ten miles north of Rutland), in a simple farmhouse that also served as lodging for travelers under the name Green Tavern. Their mother Julia (died 1873) was a clairvoyant, and the brothers were supposed to have inherited her psychic powers, demonstrating them from a very young age. The Eddys held séances for visitors within their home. They came to national attention through the reportage of Henry Steel Olcott. Olcott was a New York City reporter who wrote for the *New York Tribune* in the 1850s before serving in the Civil War. Following the war he practiced law and resumed journalism. Olcott traveled to Chittenden in 1874 to meet with the Eddys and investigate the fantastical claims circulating about their abilities. His report was published in the *New York Sun*. Olcott came away from this experience a committed believer in the spiritual and mediumistic powers of the brothers. He described them for his readers: “There is nothing about the Eddys or their surroundings to inspire confidence on first acquaintance. The brothers Horatio and William, who are the present mediums, are sensitive, distant, and curt to strangers, look more like hard-working rough farmers than prophets or priests of a new

dispensation, have dark complexions, black hair and eyes, stiff joints, a clumsy carriage, shrink from advances, and make newcomers feel ill at ease and unwelcome.”⁸ Following this rather unflattering description Olcott noted how they were on bad terms with their neighbors and the surrounding region at large. His visit at the Eddy’s overlapped with that of Evans, and the two became fast friends during their shared immersion in occult happenings at the farmstead.

Following their visit, Olcott wrote Evans pressing him for further observations on the happenings at the Eddy home. Olcott asked Evans if, as a medium, he could see the spirits controlling the manifestations they had both witnessed. Evans replied, in his own words, “evasively,” citing a hierarchy of spirits: the spirits that materialized and participated in the séances were controlled by other spirits harder to ascertain. Evans used the analogy, “they who *plan* the labor on a farm, do not always perform the labor.” Olcott also queried why Indian spirits were so commonly encountered, first among the Shakers, and now in the wider Spiritualist movement. Evans replied that while in the body they inhabited a lower spiritual realm and, post-mortem, had not moved far from the earth having been so unjustly “forced from their homes and hunting grounds on earth.” Shakers labored with such restless spirits, including slaves, who were often seeking redress or vengeance from mistreatment on earth. As spirit missionaries the Shakers’ role was to redirect the anger of the unhappy spirit toward the larger principle under which they were wronged and show them that, given the same powers, they might have committed the same acts. Evans opined to Olcott that the general unbelief in the spiritual world among mankind made materialization very difficult for spirits, as they had to overpower such doubt and skepticism. As for the Shakers, Evans was less sanguine about their current relations with the spirits. He lamented that “Spiritualism went out from this Order. I have always supposed it would return to this Order, and that then the manifestations, controlled by a Christ spirit, would be attended with gifts of healing, gifts of divine revelation, &c., and the organization of Pentacostal Communities, simultaneous with corresponding changes in the Civil Government. A new Heaven and a new Earth.” This revealing statement frames Elder Evans’s interest in the Eddy brothers more in the context of the decline of Shaker spirituality and vitality than his assertions of the Shakers’ primacy in Spiritualism would suggest. Further, for a leading member of the “millennial church,” his yearnings suggest that the millennium has not yet occurred. Despite

the fundamental Shaker belief in the restoration of the Christ spirit to the earth through the vessel of Mother Ann Lee, Evans believed that the American government—and by extension the world—had yet to be developed into a millennial order.⁹

Elder Evans's promotion of Spiritualism was given a significant boost by the "conversion" of New York City physician Dr. Eli P. Miller. Previously a vociferous opponent and debunker of bogus mediums, Miller visited the Eddys at Chittenden and came away completely convinced as to their ability to manifest spirits. He sent Evans a brief postcard from Chittenden dated December 28, 1874, declaring that Evans was "all sound on the genuineness of some of some of these manifestations; I have been through it—have been with the Eddys ten days. They are as true as steel: the truth about them has not half been told."¹⁰ Evans published the text of Miller's card in the *Shaker and Shakeress* with the caption title "Surrendered." At Evans request Miller prepared a lengthier *mea culpa* addressed to "Father Evans." This was also published in the *Shaker and Shakeress*. In it Miller described his experiences at length and stated that he did "not expect others to believe what I say about it, any more than I believed what others said when I was told about it." He urged "Shakerism and Spiritualism to join hands and see what they can do for the salvation of the race."¹¹

The public discussion of Spiritualism continued to gain momentum. The same day Miller sent his card to Evans from Vermont, Evans penned a letter to the *New York Tribune* challenging their "progressive" readers, as well as theologians, who accepted the stories of spirit materialization in the Bible—such as Elias (Elijah), Moses, and Jesus—to accept the female Native American spirit Honto who Evans "saw materialize cloth in plain sight of 25 people."¹² In a front page editorial entitled "The Tribune and Shakers" that Evans penned for the February 1875 issue of the *Shaker and Shakeress* (practically his personal mouthpiece), Evans accused the *Tribune* of being an "organ to defend the people of the United States, who are *in* the body, against all attempts of the people of the United States, and any other States, who are *out* of the body, from establishing a scientific communication and friendly intercourse through which they might seek to destroy that which destroys." Evans then cataloged society's ills, implying that through cooperation with the spirits living men could cure them all. Finally, he credited the spirits with freeing the serfs in Russia and freeing the slaves in America.¹³



Elder Harvey L. Eads

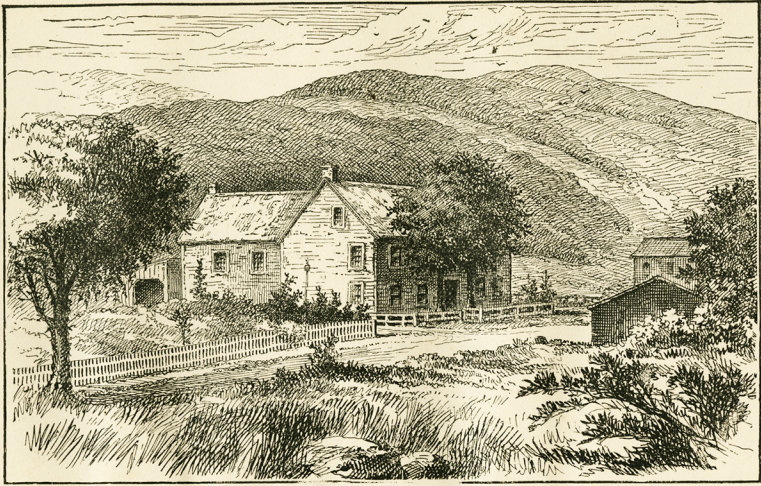
Comments like these led many Shakers, most vocally South Union, Kentucky, elder Harvey L. Eads to condemn Evans. Evans and Eads were theologically at odds on most things. Eads explored this territory at great length in *Expression of Faith*, his polemic published in 1875 to refute Evans on many fronts. Provocatively, Evans had solicited Eads's opinion about the *Shaker and Shakeress*, and Eads let him have it with both barrels. Among nine points of dislike Eads noted that "The manner in which [*Shaker and Shakeress*] is conducted is such as to make the world believe that Brother F. is the head of the institution, and all he says is orthodox Shakerism." Significantly, Eads's last point was that the *Shaker and Shakeress* "to my extreme mortification,... advocates the doctrine of SPIRIT MATERIALIZATION, And of *de-materialization*, both of which are impossible, unless a thing can be what it is and something else at the same time. No reason whatever is appealed to, to sustain the theory. Its devotees seem to rise on the wings of the wind and by imagination, and a love of the marvelous, are carried away to the supersensuous and still find no solid resting place."¹⁴ The conflict between Eads and Evans went much further, and its scope lies beyond the present investigation of the Shakers

and the Eddys. However, it does serve as a reminder that Evans's total acceptance and embrace of Spiritualism did not reflect the opinions of many of his brethren and sisters.

However, many other Believers did eagerly embrace the work of the spirits in the broader world. John Greaves wrote Daniel Fraser of the Shirley, Massachusetts, community describing the marvels witnessed by himself and Evans at the Eddy house. Fraser wrote the *Shaker and Shakeress* excitedly endorsing Greaves's description and admonishing skeptics that "Spiritualism will humble the pride of all flesh."¹⁵ Corresponding member James Martin Peebles similarly asserted, "I have not had a doubt of the *fact* that materialized spirits again walk the earth.... The signs of the time are ominous.... The angels are crying 'Come up higher.' Are our 'lamps trimmed and burning?'"¹⁶ Long-time Shaker sympathizer Jeremiah Hacker, however, was less enamored of the Eddys. In a letter to Evans referencing the bogus materialization of a spirit dubbed "Katie King," Hacker declared, "I am as certain that the Eddys are impostors." In his printed reply Evans bluntly told Hacker he was "mistaken about the *materialization* business."¹⁷ The Shakers at Canterbury, New Hampshire, were also beginning to test the waters of Spiritualism. The medium Mary Hardy of Boston conducted a séance at their village on March 22, 1875, in a cabinet of the Shakers' own making. Hardy was known for her materializations of paraffin hands and slippers.¹⁸

Two more Mount Lebanon Shakers made the trip to Chittenden to witness the Eddy manifestations. The *Shaker and Shakeress* reported that Thomas Smith, broom maker at the Lower Canaan Family, and Charles Sizer of the Upper Canaan Family, attended "four Seances at the Eddy's, attest the reality of over thirty APPEARANCES from the Spirit world."¹⁹ Smith and Sizer arrived at the Eddys' on April 22, 1875. In a lengthy account of their trip Smith described the Eddy farmhouse in detail:

The particular house made notorious by these materializations, is a plain one, standing a few feet back from the road, with some claims to modern additions in the shape of an Ell, running back from its center some 40 ft. with width of 20 ft. two stories high. The upper room of this addition being devoted to the spirits, is entered by a door in the back center of the old house. Its one large room is entirely unfurnished, with the exception of a stove, three or four common chairs, two long rough benches, a common table with leaves 4x2 ft., on which are placed various common musical



THE EDDY HOMESTEAD.

instruments—violin, accordion, harmonicon, tin horns, bells, etc. At farther end of this room the floor is raised 2 ft., forming a platform 4 ft. wide by 2 ft. high, running the width of the room, and inclosed by a low railing, except at south end, where are steps. The cabinet is on this platform, and is formed by taking the space from the chimney (which stands in the center of back wall) to north side of building, inclosed with lath and plaster partition, leaving door space next to chimney, forming a room 8x2 ft. The doorway is covered by an old blanket, hung on hooks at upper end.

The first séance was conducted that evening beginning at 7:30. Eighteen people crowded the dim room, with many seated on a bench in front holding hands. William Eddy retreated inside the cabinet on the platform while Horatio Eddy played the violin, performing familiar tunes—both sacred and secular—to which the audience sang along. After ten minutes the curtain on the cabinet was pushed aside and there stood the first of fifteen spirits that materialized during the fifty-minute session. The spirits danced, rapped, materialized cloth out of thin air, and were illuminated under strong lantern light allowing visitors to clearly discern their features.

Smith and Sizer also attended variant forms of the *séance* called by the Eddys light and dark. These involved physical contact between the medium and an audience member and resulted in seemingly physically impossible movement of objects such as musical instruments, which would fly through the air playing music that was “very harmonious and pleasing, purporting to be a welcome of some parties to Spirit-land.” However, the most powerful evidence of the Eddy’s veracity was presented to Smith and Sizer at the last *séance* they attended:

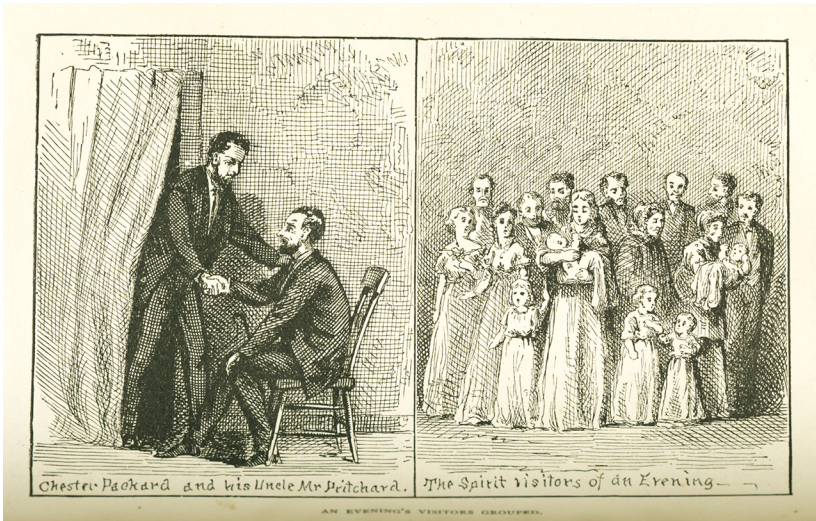
There appeared a Shaker sister, whom the audience recognized as a Quakeress, while *we* knew her as one of our sisterhood, who departed many years since. She answered many questions, and was succeeded by another sister, who had deceased only a few months, who also answered questions. They were both unmistakably dressed in full Shaker costume, even to cap and handkerchief. This of course was very satisfactory to us—their names, Mary Ann Patterson and Martha Poole—special friends.

Mary Ann Patterson died of breast cancer at Mount Lebanon twenty years earlier on February 9, 1855. In contrast, Canaan Shaker Martha Poole deceased on May 5, 1874, aged seventy-eight, less than a year prior. In light of these astonishing manifestations Smith summed up his experience by stating, “I unhesitatingly pronounce the materialization genuine—a reality.”²⁰

The experiences of his fellow brethren at Chittenden prompted an excited Evans to write the Eddys on June 15 and propose that they join forces to hold a “public meeting, in some great city, where the speakers—part of them—were materialized, would begin a Religious Revival as much exceeding that got up by Moody and Sankey.” As preparation for this momentous spectacle of ghosts preaching to the public, Evans invited the Eddys to Mount Lebanon to hold a series of *séances*. Evans referred to the Eddys as “Media,” the spirits as “Motors,” and the Shakers as “Substrata.” Joined together they could form a “*battery*, composed of your natural Mediumship, the Shakers’ acquired practical Spirituality, and those controlling Spirits in the other world, who have the whole movement in charge.” Evans requested that the Eddys consult with the highest divinity with which they were in contact for approbation of the scheme. Horatio Eddy replied to Evans on June 20 and stated, surely with regret, that the spirits at present would not permit them to make any arrangements to leave Chittenden. He assured Evans, however, that “should they desire us to go to Mt. Lebanon, or anywhere else, we are ready.”²¹

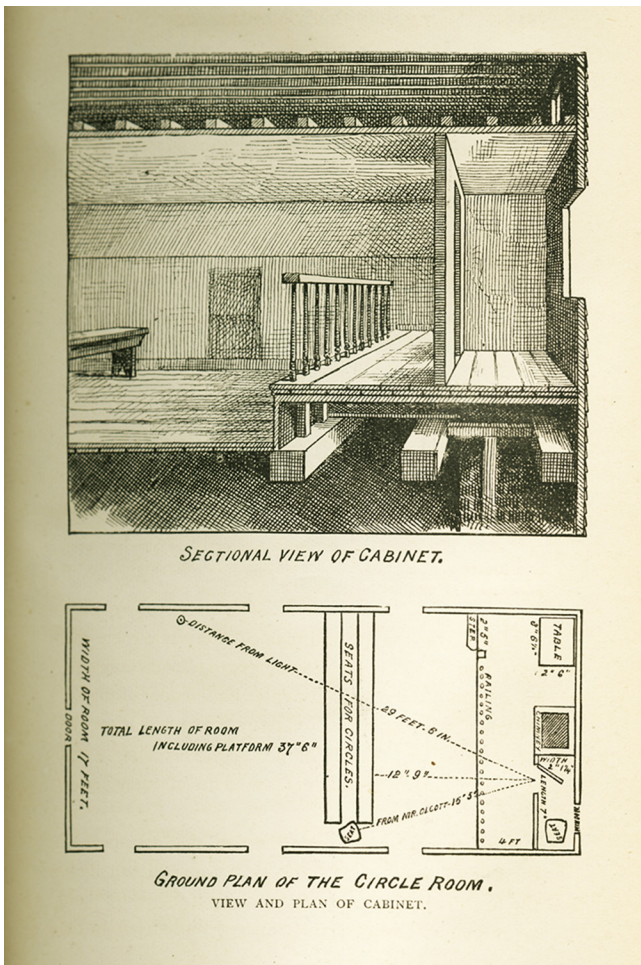
Evans, in his editorial capacity, redoubled his support for the Eddys—despite the spirits’ reluctance to take the show on the road—in the September 1875 issue of *Shaker and Shakeress*. Perhaps to mollify some of his critics, Evans opened the issue with a lengthy, unsigned editorial charging that the “Spiritualists have not met our expectations. They are not progressive. They continue in their bad habits. They love the fashions, the riches, and the pride of the world. They ‘marry and are given in marriage.’ They fight, and, in many other ways, prove themselves anti-Christian.... The materializations that we witnessed a few months since at the Eddys were genuine; and yet these materialized spirits, with few exceptions, are from the lower spheres.” The author asserted that many Spiritualists, as well as regular clergy, were seeking out the Shakers for direction on how to approach the exalted state that the Shakers represented as a millennial body.²² Another column presented the opinion of distinguished English traveler Robert Cooper who visited Mount Lebanon after spending two days at the Eddys investigating the materializations, which he pronounced to be totally genuine. Despite opening the issue with such an unflattering assessment of Spiritualists, Evans closed it with a strong commentary entitled “The Point: Fact, or Fraud—Which?”

When from five to twenty-five *forms*, of men, women and children, appear in an evening seance, on the platform of Eddy Hall, in Chittenden, in presence of from twenty-five to fifty spectators, gathered from all part of the Union, and some from foreign countries, one of two things occurs—*either* those *forms* are the product of downright fraud and lying trickery, and all these spectators—leading minds, from Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, London, Texas, Rhode Island and Mt. Lebanon—are imposed upon, deceived, deluded, bewitched, and made to think and *know* that they see, and hear uttered, high and noble sentiments touching the welfare of society, by the materialized spirits of men and women from the Spirit-World, when in reality it is only the Medium and his co-conspirators—*or*, a *New Epoch* has opened to mankind, that shall ultimate in the *Kingdom of Heaven upon Earth*, uniting *God* to *Humanity*, through the Law of Materialization and *de*-materialization. Through it agency Angels will descend upon the sons and daughters of men, eliminating, from Humanity, evils, *physical* and *spiritual*—substituting in their place the *virtues* and *graces* of the *Angelic hosts*—the consummation of the ages, so long looked for—the Millennial Era.²³



Perhaps to further confirm his beliefs, and to gather additional adherents, Evans journeyed back to Chittenden with two Shaker sisters in July 1875. Predictably, Evans reported that of the forty-five visitors present all but one were convinced as to the veracity of the proceedings.²⁴ The thoroughly converted Dr. E. P. Miller, now an evangelist of Spiritualism, excitedly wrote again to “Father Evans” of his eleven-day stay at the Eddy’s where he saw William’s new cabinet. Miller was particularly enthralled with the Eddys’ sister Ms. Huntoon, who was also a medium. From a seat within the room she was able to materialize groups of spirits simultaneously who would perform requested tunes on musical instruments. It was Miller’s belief that Horatio and William were jealous of their sister’s powers and her ability to draw a crowd. In conclusion Miller optimistically opined, “I believe we shall soon get such control of these spirits, that they will do any thing we want them to do.... There is a good time coming. It won’t be long.”²⁵ Horatio Eddy later published a letter in the *Shaker and Shakeress* denying any jealousy of his sister. On the contrary, he wished that the work of the spirits would penetrate every house and street in the land.²⁶

The popular press supplied considerable coverage of the Eddys and their fellow mediums throughout the mid-1870s. Eddy family mediums, and others, were repeatedly exposed as frauds by audience members who were willing to physically assault one of the materialized spirits during a séance. Without exception these were usually revealed to be the mediums



or an accomplice wearing a costume. It is hard to account for the sheer variety of costumes—representative of either gender from a global range of cultures and religious sects—and for the physical dexterity of the mediums who impersonated children, dwarves, or crippled adults. An Eddy associated named Chaplin who was hired by a true believer in Fair Haven, Vermont, to perform materializations was exposed by skeptical investigators in March 1875 after being apprehended while manifesting a “little ‘dumpy’ spirit” ambling about the room. He confessed that he was performing the séance by the same method the Eddys taught him.²⁷ The

publication of Henry Steel Olcott's full length account of the Eddys *People from the Other World* brought even more attention and visitors, believers and skeptics alike, to Chittenden. William Eddy informed a reporter from the *Boston Herald* that the family would cease holding séances at the end of August 1875. The reporter declared the "performance at Spirit Vale as a fraud too gross and vile to be characterized. And yet the strange phenomenon is presented to scores of intelligent people frequenting these seances for consecutive weeks and months, under a firm conviction of the genuineness of the whole thing."²⁸

Events climaxed when an anonymous report published by the *New York Sun*—ironically the newspaper which had first published Olcott's laudatory stories about the Eddys—revealed in full detail the manner in which the Eddys fooled visitors to their séances. Entitled "Crooked Spirits," the article explained that brother William and Horatio had had a falling out, and that William was leaving Chittenden. Their fraud was perpetrated via a sliding floor under William's cabinet that, when opened, provided hidden access to the kitchen below. William's room was just adjacent to the kitchen, and doubled as storage for props and costumes. Visitors were seated in the "circle room" with hands joined to provide spiritual current needed for the materialization. William then disappeared into the cabinet while music was played. For a number of minutes visitors listened to a variety of tunes, the sound helping to mask the noise of the floor sliding away. In the meantime, the Eddys' sisters Alice and Delia, who attended and managed the séances with her husband Edward Brown, were waiting below to begin the manifestation of a number of regular female spirit visitors. These included the "Lady of the Lake," "Meta, The Witch of the Mountain," Native American female "Honto," and "Mother Eaton." Costume changes were made below and the Eddy sisters ascended a small passage adjacent to the chimney, which abutted the cabinet wherein William sat. It seems that William Eddy himself manifested the male spirits that appeared toward the end of the meeting, using a high pitched, squeaky voice, or speaking through a tin trumpet, to mask his own voice. Once a majority of the audience was raptly engaged, generic spirit characters appeared that might be recognized by a member of the audience as a longed-for departed relative. Spirits often confirmed their identities by knocking three times when their names were called. When they spoke it was usually in a low and indistinct voice.²⁹ The Eddys took advantage of those most willing to believe in their powers, and most desperate to make contact with

departed loved ones. The Shakers shared these motivations, and for many of them the works of the Eddys and their ilk served as validation of the Shakers' many years of intercourse with the spirits. Consequently, despite mounting evidence of deeply fraudulent behavior, the Shakers remained faithful followers of the Eddys. The controversy, however, proved too much for William Eddy and members of his extended family. They departed Chittenden in December 1875 to ply their trade in cities across America.³⁰

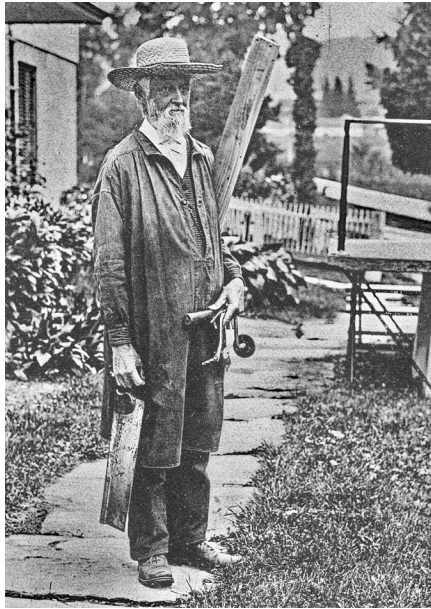


In May 1876 an unidentified Shaker brother from Canterbury who was on business in Rutland, Vermont, took the opportunity to visit the famed “Spirit Vale.” Upon his return he related the entire tale to Elder Henry C. Blinn, who wrote it down. Walking the eight miles from Rutland to Chittenden he found Horatio Eddy at working in his orchard. Eddy was quite congenial and welcomed the young Shaker into his home. However, the Shaker was informed that he was too early in the season, and that no séances were being held yet. The Shaker was quite disappointed, and finally Eddy consented to make some spiritual photographs, the first of which depicted a Shaker and a little child. Fortunately, the Eddys’ sister

Mrs. Huntoon was holding a materialization at the farm adjacent where she lived. A small group convened there after 9:30 p.m., and the séance was held in the kitchen of the farmhouse. A bedroom off the kitchen, which the visitors were invited to inspect in advance, served as the medium's cabinet. The lights were dimmed, curtains were drawn, and the spirits began to materialize. They included John Wilkes Booth (who provided musical accompaniment), two Shaker sisters, a Vermont tailor, and a company of yelping Indians, among whom was an imposing Narragansett brave. The satisfied company was dismissed at 10:45, and the Shaker walked the dark country roads back to Rutland, arriving at 2 a.m. The account rendered by Blinn has a subtle undertone of bemused incredulity, but he subsequently visited the Eddys himself, so his interest was clearly piqued.³¹

Shaker brother Thomas Smith of Canaan encountered the Eddys again while on business at Utica, New York, with two sisters, probably during November 1877. The trio attended three materialization séances on successive days and were treated to the sight of a number of former Shakers, including one Smith described as “short in stature and much deformed, with peculiarities known only to her friends.” To Smith this spirit was a perfect test, especially when she said her name. He noted that this person's obituary was published in the June 1877 *Shaker*. In fact, that issue contains the following notice: “At Canaan, N.Y., March 26, 1877, Elmira E. Hull, aged 24 years. (Crippled from birth, life here was of little worth to her).”³² Other Shaker spirits addressed the trio by name and uttered messages to be relayed to Believers at Mount Lebanon, and some even approached the trio and shook their hands. These moving encounters only deepened Smith's faith in the Eddys.³³ Frederick W. Evans and Upper Canaan Shaker Charles Greaves (brother of John who had accompanied Evans on his first visit to the Eddys in Vermont) also visited William Eddy and company at Utica early in the spring of 1878. Although no Shakers were materialized, Greaves's account is positive and he concluded that he could “do the least violence to my senses and to my common sense, to accept what I saw as being genuine spirit materialization.”³⁴

Around the time Greaves saw them at Utica, William Eddy and company were arrested at Albany, New York, under the statute related to mountebanks, an archaic term for swindlers who deceived people to get their money. The March 29, 1878, issue of the Spiritualist newspaper *Medium and Daybreak* reported “The Eddy mediums of America were recently arrested ... for mediumistic proceedings and ‘disorderly conduct.’”

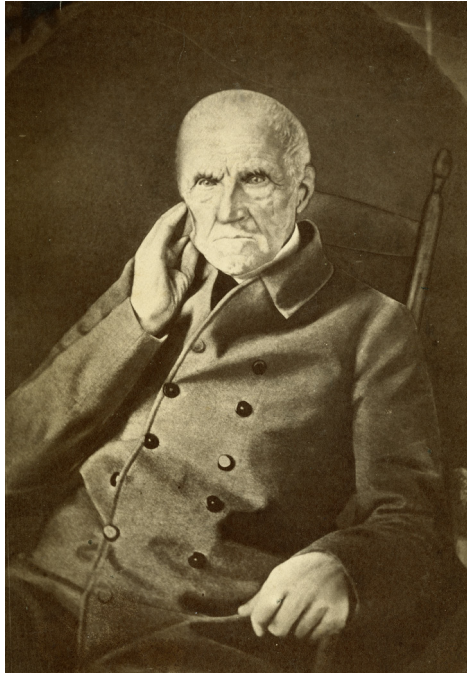


Brother Charles Greaves

They were released on the day of their trial by a Judge Clute for lack of proof, although he did find them liable for holding an unlicensed public performance since they charged admission to their séances. The article reported that “a number of Shakers headed by the venerable Elder Evans, Dr. Ditson, and the spiritual mediums themselves, seemed especially pleased at the turn affairs took, regarding it, doubtless, as ‘a victory for religious liberty.’”³⁵ This encounter must have further galvanized the relationship between the Shakers and the Eddys as Elder Evans invited them to Mount Lebanon to “rest and recuperate, physically and mentally.” In Evans’s words: “They needed it.”³⁶

Recuperating in the friendly confines of Evans’s domain at the North Family were William Eddy, Delia and Edward Brown, and accomplice David Williams. During the course of their visit the Eddys performed ten séances in a cabinet specially constructed for them by the Shakers. An article in the *Berkshire County Eagle*, which the Shakers later reprinted as a broadside, furnished readers with a full account of these activities. Entitled “Spirits the Shakers Saw,” it was published on July 4, 1878, apparently

with the sanction of Evans who assured readers that there were “no trap doors or secret closets ... by which accessories could be ‘spirited’ into the cabinet.” Thus, it was all the more remarkable that thirty-one separate spirits were materialized for a delighted Shaker audience. These included Evans’s brother, radical labor writer George Henry Evans, two natural brothers of Eldress Antoinette Doolittle, and some of the variously misshapen or disfigured Shakers who had manifested themselves previously at other séances. Nearly three hundred Believers from Mount Lebanon and Canaan, New York, as well as members from the nearby Hancock, Massachusetts, community attended séances held in both the morning and evening. The Eddys requested the Shakers to sing continuously between spirit manifestations, perhaps to mask the noise of the complicated comings-and-goings of the spirits.³⁷



Elder Richard Bushnell

Many familiar Eddy spirits accompanied them to Mount Lebanon, including the venerable Mother Eaton, Meta Witch of the Mountain,

Honto, and the Lady of the Lake. Newly conjured Native American spirits appeared, as well as the two-thousand-year-old daughter of Belshazzar, King of Babylon. A notable addition to the Shaker spirits came in the form of an entirely convincing Elder Richard Bushnell. Bushnell, who lived at Mount Lebanon from 1813 until his death in 1873, had been an elder at the North Family, and ultimately a member of the Central Ministry. Therefore most of the Shakers in the audience would have been intimately acquainted with him. The fact that the Believers accepted his materialization as genuine speaks to their deep faith, as well as the remarkable skills of the Eddys to meet the desires and expectations of their audiences. Here is the Shakers' own description of their manifested departed fellow Believers:

Elder Richard, appeared very much in size as while living, dark colored suit and white kerchief around the neck, hair white. Nancy Crossman, Annie Crossman, Nancy Lockwood, medium size, with cap and neckerchief. Mary Jane Maffit, Melissa Soule, Margaret Pattison, Rhoda Offord, all four nearly the same in height and dress. Ellen Rayson, dwarf, dressed in white. Almira Hull, dwarf, dressed in white. Alice Barnum, about three feet high, dressed in white. W. Offord, striking resemblance of his form while living, dressed in dark colored suit.

Nancy Lockwood, with spectacles on, whispered a few words of love and blessing.

Anna Crossman, Also gave a few similar sentences, in a low tone.

Almira Hull, recognized by her form as being the dwarf who deceased at Canaan. When her name was spoken she rapped loudly as she could not speak.

Elder Richard whispered, "God bless you" and retired.

Wm. Offord just spoke in a whisper, "yea" and "nay" in reply to questions.³⁸

An account of the séances published by "Skeptic" posed some pointed questions to Elder Evans. To his credit, Evans replied. When asked if Evans personally inspected the cabinet, he stated, "I did. I know there was no possible chance for collusion, trickery or professional imposition. The whole affair was so completely under our own control, and the arrangements of our making, that fraud in the séances is much more incredible than that

they were spirit manifestations.” In defense of the Eddys, and Spiritualism writ broad, Evans declared, “Sometimes incredulity overdoes itself. To be infidel to unchristian doctrines or superstition is one thing, and is excusable, if not commendable. But to be infidel to truth and goodness is quite another affair. Spiritualism is only an episode in Shaker history—one of its clements... I don’t see how any one can be a Christian and not be a spiritualist. I can see how a person might be a spiritualist and not be a Christian.”³⁹

The Shakers’ faith in William Eddy and his abilities appear to have endured repeated public exposures of the family for fraudulent activities. Canterbury’s venerable Elder Henry C. Blinn traveled with friends to Nashua, New Hampshire, on December 18, 1879, to attend a séance conducted by one of the Eddys.⁴⁰ A visitor to Mount Lebanon’s North Family in July 1881 found William Eddy back in residence and attended a séance during his visit. He was astonished that the Shakers seemed to have “implicit faith in its genuineness.” He described the general sense of excitement within the community about Spiritualism, and candid discussions amongst the Believers about their own experiences with paranormal phenomena.⁴¹ Perhaps, in the end, this was why the Eddys and their displays proved so seductive to the Shakers: they were able to revive a much beloved aspect of Shaker life—the manifestation of spirits—that had been a part of daily life for most Believers, but had waned noticeably since the 1840s. Much more remains to be written about the Eddys, as well as the Shakers’ complex relationship with the Spiritualist movement. Ultimately, the Shakers and the Eddys enjoyed an innocent symbiotic relationship, each supplying the needs of the other and furthering the broader goals of Shakerism in concert with the global explosion of Spiritualism as a practical religion.⁴²

Notes

Woodcut illustrations were taken from Henry Steel Olcott’s *People from the Other World* (Hartford, Conn.: American Pub. Co., 1875). A sincere thank you to Marc Demarest, John Patrick Deveney, and John Buescher for their tireless help in locating information about the Eddy brothers and extended family.

1. Henry C. Blinn, *The Manifestation of Spiritualism Among the Shakers, 1837-1847* (East Canterbury, N.H.: 1899), 5.

2. Frederick W. Evans, *Autobiography of a Shaker, and Revelation of the Apocalypse* (New York: American News Co., 1888), 18-19.
3. "Shaker Convention," *Daily Graphic* (New York), November 23, 1874, 168.
4. The *Daily Graphic* article for November 24, 1874, quotes Evans as stating "All the Shakers are mediums. There is scarcely an exception." Evans later qualified this statement to Olcott in *People from the Other World* (Hartford, Conn: American Publishing Company, 1875), 399, by stating "'Shakers are all mediums,' hardly conveys a right idea. 'Everybody in the house was obsessed,' should be many, instead of all."
5. "Spirits Among the Shakers," *Daily Graphic* (New York), November 24, 1874, 176.
6. Ibid.
7. *New-York Tribune*, December 26, 1872, 2.
8. Henry Steel Olcott, *People from the Other World* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1875), 18.
9. Ibid, 392-402. The Shakers, lead by Evans, addressed the development of the American government into a millennial order at the Shaker Convention held at Steinway Hall in New York City, November 22, 1874.
10. "Surrendered," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 2 (February 1875): 16.
11. "Dr. Miller's Conversion," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 7 (July 1875): 51.
12. Frederick W. Evans, "The Tribune and the Shakers," *New York Tribune*, January 12, 1874.
13. Frederick W. Evans, "The Tribune and Shakers," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 2 (February 1875): 9-10.
14. Harvey L. Eades, *Expression of Faith, A Discursive Letter* (Orange, N.J.: Printed for the Author at the Chronicle Book & Job Printing Office, 1875), 19-20.
15. Daniel Fraser, [Letter dated Shaker Village, Shirley, Mass. December 14, 1874], *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 3 (March 1875): 19.
16. James Martin Peebles, "J. M. Peebles," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 3 (March 1875): 24.
17. Jeremiah Hacker, [Letter dated Berlin, N.J., February 15, 1875], *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 4 (April 1875): 27.
18. Henry Clay Blinn, "A Historical Record of the Society of Believers, Vol. I. and II.," 1892, v.1, p. 234. Hancock Shaker Village, #6437a & b.
19. "Two Witnesses," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 6 (June 1875): 42.

20. Thomas Smith, "Visit to the Eddys," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 8 (August 1875): 59-60.
21. "Public Materialization," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 8 (August 1875): 58.
22. "Spiritualists," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 9 (September 1875): 65.
23. "The Point," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 9 (September 1875): 72.
24. "Second Visit to the Eddys," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no.10 (October 1875): 73.
25. "Dr. Miller's Letter," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5, no. 11 (November 1875): 83.
26. Horatio G. Eddy, [Letter dated Chittenden, Vt. Oct 30, 1875], *Shaker and Shakeress* 5:12 (December 1875), 92.
27. "The Fraud of the Eddy Materialization Exposed," *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, March 29, 1875, 2.
28. "The Eddy Boys. More Gossip about the Mediums of Spirit Vale, More Evidence of Fraud," *St. Albans Advertiser* (St. Albans, Vermont), August 20, 1875, 4.
29. "Crooked Spirits," *Sunday Times* (Chicago, Illinois), November 28, 1875, 9.
30. "Hegira from Spirit Vale," *St. Albans Weekly Messenger* (St. Albans, Vt.), December 18, 1875, 7.
31. Henry Clay Blinn, "A Young Shaker Among the Eddys," manuscript in the collection of the American Society for Psychical Research, New York, N.Y. See full transcription later in this issue of *ACSQ*.
32. "Evergreen Shores," *Shaker* 7, no. 6 (June 1877): 48.
33. Thomas Smith, "Spirit Materializations," *Shaker* 7, no. 12 (December 1877): 94.
34. Charles Greaves, "Materialization," *Shaker Manifesto* 8, no. 4 (April 1878): 83.
35. *Medium and Daybreak* 9, no. 417 (March 29, 1878): 198.
36. "Elder Evans' Statement," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 12, 1878, 9.
37. *Spirits the Shakers Saw*, ([Mt. Lebanon, N.Y.]: n.p., [1878?]), broadside. Originally published in the *Berkshire County (Mass.) Eagle*, July 4, 1878.
38. Ibid.
39. "Queries and Answers," *Preacher and Homiletic Monthly* 3, no. 3 (December, 1878): 183.
40. Blinn, "A Historical Record," 1892, v. 1, p. 245.
41. "Among the Shakers. A Visit to Mount Lebanon," *New-York Tribune* (July 30, 1881), 5.
42. For Marc Demarest's great article on the Eddys before and after their relationship with the Shakers see: <http://ehbritten.blogspot.com/2015/10/hontos-cave-some-notes-on-mediumships.html>