

Spooks in San Diego

A number of quite prominent San Diegans attended a séance given by Elsie Reynolds in a room at Dr. Barnes' residence; Friday evening . . . a lady spirit was materialized, and came into the audience to shake hands. A lady present, at an opportune moment, seized the spirit around the waist with one arm and clinched its wrist with the other hand. The spirit shrieked and attempted to tear itself away. . . . The séance ended abruptly.

--San Diego Union, January 20, 1889.

The religion of "Spiritualism" claimed millions of followers in the United States and Europe in the nineteenth century. Believers were entranced by the notion that spirits of their deceased loved ones could be contacted through "mediums." Widely accepted, adherents to spiritualism included Mary Todd Lincoln who hosted séances in the White House to reach her departed sons Eddie and Willie.

Spiritualist demonstrations could also be entertaining, profitable for the mediums, and more often than not, fraudulent, as San Diegans would discover in the summer of 1888.

"A disappointed and victimized audience left the Louis Opera House last night about 9 o'clock," reported the *Union* on July 20. After customers paid 50 cents each to see the mysteries of a spiritualistic séance, the demonstration by medium Percy Clifton "did not séance worth a cent." Angry ticket buyers cried "humbug" and the medium was arrested for allegedly taking money under false pretenses.

"Professor" Clifton, an ex-actor from San Francisco, had appeared before 300 people--promising to materialize departed spirits before the audience. The performance lasted about one hour. Witnesses in the court case that followed described how Clifton had appeared on stage, waving his hands, exclaiming: "I see them coming."

As the "spirits" appeared Clifton would call out their names and ask the audience if anyone recognized them. Several people shouted out that they did. One enthusiastic ticket buyer persistently bobbed up among the rear benches, shouting "I recognize that spirit; oh yes, I know that spirit!" The man turned out to be Clifton's business manager.

A preliminary hearing drew a packed house in the Police Court of Judge Charles Monroe. Witnesses describing the séance, "kept the courtroom in an uproar of laughter," which the

LOUIS OPERA HOUSE

THIS EVENING,
JULY 19, 1888.

PERCY CLIFTON

The greatest **PLATFORM TEST**
MEDIUM of the Age, will give his

LAST GRAND SEANCE,

At **Louis Opera House, To-Night,**
assisted by

Miss MAUD JONES

AND OTHERS.

ADMISSION, 50 CTS.

COMMENCES AT 8 SHARP.

C. J. HILDRETH, Printer, 1411 E Street, near Fifth.

judge found difficult to control. Many claimed they believed in spiritualism and had expected to see departed spirits. One of the disappointed witnesses declared he had paid \$1 at the door for himself and his wife "but saw no spirits, except what he got at the beer garden across the street" after the show was over.

After listening to testimony for several days, Judge Monroe forwarded the case to Superior Court. But before a trial could begin, Professor Clifton slinked out of town. The authorities chose not to pursue the disgraced medium.

Ironically, many San Diego spiritualists praised the prosecution of Clifton as a blow against fraud and deception. As the *Union* explained, "there are fraudulent pretenders among those who claim to be mediums, all spiritualists admit, but they all believe in the existence of true mediums."

The faith of true devotees was tested again with the arrival in San Diego of Mrs. Elsie Reynolds, perhaps the most notorious medium on the Pacific Coast and mentor to Percy Clifton.

In a materializing séance" held at a meeting hall at 5th and H Street (Market), Reynolds produced several ghostly apparitions who glided in and out of the "spirit cabinet" in the darkened hall. The spirit of little Lillie Robert appeared, one named "Effie," and another called "Gruff."

But the séance ended in an uproar when a man abruptly turned up the lights in the gas-lit room. The audience saw a startled Mrs. Reynolds in the cabinet with a mask in her hands and a gauze robe dangling from her bustle.

Several in the audience swore out complaints and once again Judge Monroe hosted a courtroom of witnesses anxious to describe the latest spiritualist experience. *San Diego Union*, Oct. 17, 1888

Representing Mrs. Reynolds, attorney Melville Rawson tried to lay a scriptural foundation for belief in spirits when he asked one witness if she believed in the Bible. "I do, absolutely," she replied. "Do you believe that Mary Magdalene saw two angels appear before Christ in the temple in which laid?" Rawson then asked.

"MANY A COLD KISS."

A Peep Into the Cabinet of Mrs. Elsie Reynolds.

SPIRITUALISM AND MEDIUMS.

**The Result of an Investigation—Great Crowds
at Justice Monroe's Court—The Case
for the People Nearly Closed.**

Long before Police Judge Monroe took his seat in the Police Court yesterday morning every available seat allotted to the public was taken, and many of the chairs beyond the railings were occupied by ladies and gentlemen anxious to listen to the second day's proceedings in the Reynolds-Grindell-Tooley spiritualistic case. The defendants came into court shortly after 10 o'clock. By this time the room was literally packed. When the court opened Judge Monroe counseled the audience to make no demonstration during the progress of the case.

N. H. Dodson, the witness who was on the stand when the case closed on Monday evening, again took up his position, and testified that he recognized the mask produced as the face of the alleged spirit of Lillie Roberts on the night of the expose at Red Men's Hall. He also saw it in the hands of Mr. Boaz at the conclusion of the seance, when he announced that that was the paraphernalia of which spooks were made. In cross-examination, witness said that he had been practicing law in the county for nineteen years. He considered that he had been defrauded out of 50 cents by the defendants. He saw several persons at the seance with whom he was acquainted. One of them, a Mr. Pigeon, had a conversation with some of the alleged spirits. The detailing of these details caused considerable amusement

Judge Monroe answered instead, indignantly stating, "I regard such a question, when applied in connection with the evidence [of] masks and faces which have been produced here, as nothing less than blasphemy."

Monroe would hear testimony for another week before calling the case "one of the flimsiest frauds ever perpetuated on a good natured public." He did not find the evidence sufficient, however, to sustain a conviction. The case against Elsie Reynolds was dismissed.

Unchastened, Mrs. Reynolds continued to call to the spirits in San Diego. Her last hurrah would be a séance at the home of Dr. George Barnes on 6th Street in January 1889. After materializing a lady spirit, the show ended prematurely when a skeptic grabbed the spirit, which proved to be a flesh and blood confederate of the medium.

Elsie Reynolds would retire to San Francisco where she advertised her services as "the renowned materializing medium" in the San Francisco *Chronicle* until 1902.

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