

WHAT IS SPIRITUALISM?

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Social Studies B.8.1 – Interpret the past using a variety of sources such as biographies, diaries, journals, artifacts, eyewitness interviews, and other primary source materials, and evaluate the credibility of sources used.

Social Studies E.4.8 – Describe and distinguish among the values and beliefs of different groups and institutions.

Spiritualism is a religion that was popular in the 1850s and again in the 1920s. Spiritualists believed that people could communicate with the spirits of the dead. They believed that people called mediums had special powers to send and receive messages to and from the spirits of the dead. Spiritualism was born when two sisters, Margaret and Kate Fox of Hydesville, New York, claimed to have communicated with the spirit of a peddler who said he was murdered and buried in their basement. They said that the spirit spoke to them through rapping noises that seemed to come from the floor, walls, and other areas of the room. Their story quickly spread and suddenly other people claimed to be mediums who could talk to spirits.

But, why was Spiritualism so popular? There were a lot of reform movements going on at the time. In the late 1800s, immigration, urbanization, and industrialization caused Americans to experience excitement and optimism as well as anxiety and fear about the future. There were so many new possibilities, but also so many changes in the ways people thought, worked, and lived. During this time, people began calling for more rights for workers (like better working conditions, better pay, and less hours) and women (like the right to vote). Many also fought against the abuse of alcohol. Some fought to prevent the society from changing – like the Klu Klux Klan in the South, which fought against new rights for African-Americans. Spiritualism was a religion that offered some reforms of Christianity. More people became interested in Spiritualism after World War I (1914-18) and the Spanish Flu Epidemic in 1917-18. These events killed over 750,000 Americans. As their loved ones grieved they were encouraged by the promise that they could somehow communicate with the spirit of those who had passed away. Families looked to Spiritualism hoping to reach the souls of lost husbands, fathers, and sons killed in the War and of the men, women, and children who fell victim to the Spanish Flu.

What does Spiritualism have to do with Houdini? When Houdini was a struggling, young magician, he actually performed séances in front of audiences as a part of his show. Houdini would stroll through town before his performance, gathering information and gossip about local people. He also read the newspaper and visited graveyards to learn about recent deaths. When he did a séance show, he could then reveal this personal information, making him appear to have a special talent or supernatural knowledge. He supposedly passed messages from the spirits to the living and vice versa. While handcuffed, he also levitated tables, made objects float around, and answered sealed questions about the past, present, and future. Of course, Houdini could easily escape the

cuffs and use his hands to help him make objects move in the dark. However, Houdini felt guilty about deceiving people who were grieving and really thought he could contact their deceased loved ones. Houdini gave up doing séance shows but kept the handcuff escapes in his act. Houdini's focus on handcuff escapes caused people to think of him as an escape artist.

Years later, when Spiritualism became popular again, Houdini began a campaign to expose fake mediums; that is, those who used trickery to convince the public of their special powers to contact the dead. Houdini thought it was wrong that fake mediums charged grieving people money for séances that were just a series of tricks. He showed how fake mediums escaped from restraints and used sleight of hand to trick their audiences into believing that tables, instruments, and other objects had moved on their own. Houdini's crusade against mediums that cheated their audience made him even more popular with the public. Houdini gave lectures showing and describing the methods mediums used to make people believe in a spirit's presence. He also dedicated a part of his show to exposing these methods. Sometimes, Houdini even disguised himself and attended séances he knew were frauds so that he could jump up and prove how the medium was cheating the audience.

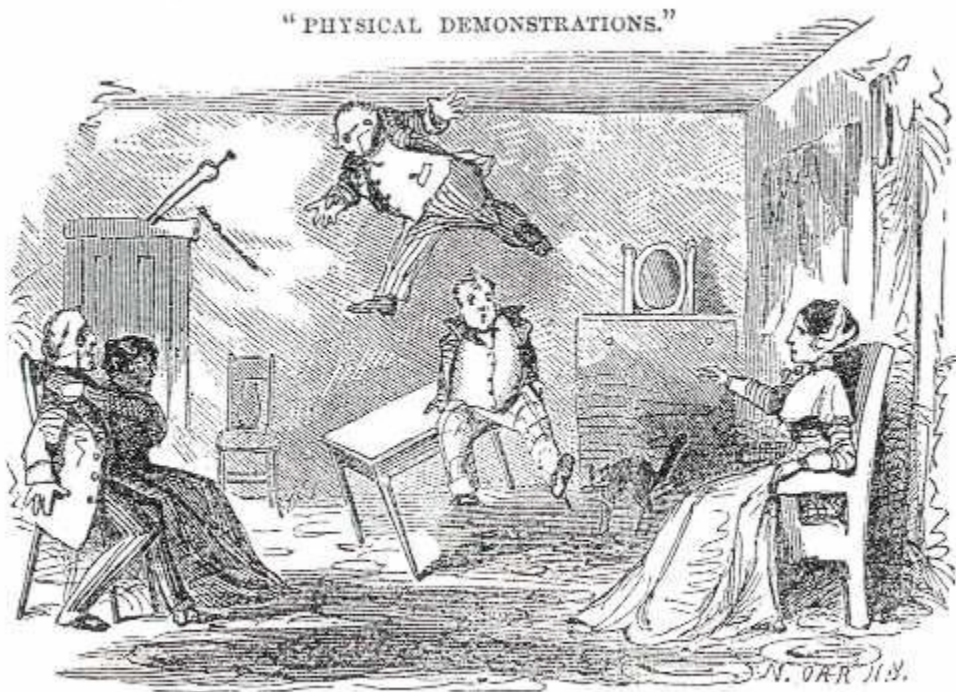
Spiritualism was something that many people talked and thought about a lot during its times of greatest popularity – in the mid to late 1800s and after World War I (1918 to the mid-1920s.) It showed up as the subject of songs, books, art, etc. Check out the following examples.

A CIRCLE OF SPIRIT-RAPPERS IN SESSION.



From Hiram Mattison's book, *Spirit Rapping Unveiled! An exposé of the origin, history, theology and philosophy of certain alleged communications from the spirit world, by means of "spirit rapping," "medium writing," "physical demonstrations," etc.* New York: Mason Brothers, 1853.
Study the drawing "A Circle of Spirit Rappers in Session" for a couple of minutes.

- 1) List two activities that are taking place in the drawing.
- 2) Using only the information provided in the picture, list three words or phrases to describe the people shown in the drawing.
- 3) Given what you know about Spiritualism, what do you think the people sitting around the table are trying to do?
- 4) Do you think they will be successful? Why or why not?



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Now, study the drawing "Physical Demonstrations."

- 1) Describe two activities that are taking place in the drawing.

- 2) Is there anything unusual about these activities? If so, what?

- 3) What emotion do most of the figures in the drawing room seem to be expressing? Why do you think this is?

- 4) Is there anyone in the drawing who does not appear to feel the same way? If so, who? What role do you think this person is playing?

- 5) Do you think this scene would supposedly come before or after the scene in the 1st drawing studied – "A Circle of Spirit Rappers in Session"?

- 6) Do you believe that the events in this drawing actually occurred? Why or why not?

Now, read the lyrics to the popular song "Angel Friends," composed by Joseph E. Winner.

"Floating on the breath of evening,
Breathing in the morning prayer,
Hear I oft the tender voices,

