

Precipitated Spirit Portraits: The Mediumship of the Bangs Sisters

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Prologue

The religion of “Spiritualism” cannot be strictly classified as a conventional belief system when comparing it to traditional or mainstream religions that are most well-known and common in modern society; the usual definition or understanding of what makes a religion, or religious denomination, applies only marginally to Spiritualism because it prides itself (since its earliest beginnings) of not being merely a religion, but also a “philosophy,” and a “science.”

Spiritualism is a *Religion* because it strives to understand and to comply with the physical, mental, and spiritual laws of nature, ‘which are the laws of God.’

Spiritualism is a *Science* because it investigates, analyzes, and classifies facts and manifestations, demonstrated from the Spirit side of life.

Spiritualism is a *Philosophy* because it studies the laws of nature both on the seen and unseen sides of life, and bases its conclusions upon present observed facts. It accepts statements of observed facts of past ages, and conclusions drawn therefrom, when sustained by reason and by results of observed present-day facts. (Royse, 92)

A notable aspect that sets Spiritualism apart from its Christian cousin (with all of its various denominations that encompass and promulgates Christianity in general) is how mediumship plays a central role in its belief system, and at the core of this belief system are the mediums, or “sensitives,” whose organisms are receptive to energy and vibrations from the spirit world and through their instrumentality are able to impart messages to those in the living from loved ones who have passed over. (Royse, pp 93-94)

To a point, a Spiritualist church’s “order of service” closely resembles that of a mainstream Christian church service but the primary difference occurs immediately following the Spiritualist minister’s sermon or lecture. In a Spiritualist church service, messages from Spirit is a central part of the service and mediums using their “mediumship” (spiritual gifts) will offer messages to the living from loved ones who have crossed over to the other side.

In a normal Spiritualist church service 1-3 mediums will offer platform messages to those in attendance. A raised platform at the front of the church where the minister gives the sermon is where the medium stands to get a better view of those in attendance and hence why this is called “platform mediumship.” Scanning psychically and mediumistically the energy in the room, the medium focuses upon picking up

vibrations with the assistance of his/her own guides¹ to connect with individual parishioners to give a message from a loved one who has transitioned from the earth plane into Spirit. These messages are not normally predictive of the future, but most often involve evidential information (like a name, detailed description, or anecdote that only the person receiving the message would understand fully) which offers confirmation to the person that a loved one is present. Mediumship, or spirit communication, endeavors to offer evidence of the continuity of life after death.



Figure 1: The Bangs Sisters, May and Elizabeth. Circa late 1870s. Courtesy of the *Hett Art Gallery and Museum*, Camp Chesterfield, Indiana.

Mediumship can largely be divided into two areas: mental and physical.² These both are represented by the gifts of clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience, and clairgustance.³ There are many examples of spiritual gifts that mediums utilize, and there are other forms of mediumship that mediums tap into in their work, but all of these can primarily be divided into either mental or physical mediumship.⁴ Mental mediumship largely incorporates the internal intuition of the medium and the Spirit messages that s/he can

¹ Spiritualists believe that everyone has five main spirit guides in their inner band that assist them in their mediumship: 1) Doctor-Teacher; 2) Master-Teacher; 3) Chemist; 4) Native American Protector; and 5) Joy Guide. Each has specific duties in assisting the medium in his/her work, with the Doctor-Teacher and Joy Guide being the two most commonly used guides that assist the medium in giving messages during services and to clients.

² See Appendix 1.

³ Regarding the gifts of mediumship, the most common ones are often referred to as the “clairs”—clairvoyance = “clear seeing”; clairaudience = “clear hearing”; clairsentience = “clear feeling”; and clairgustance = “clear smelling.” These gifts allow mediums to connect with Spirit (often through their spirit guides) in order to be impressed with a message. These messages, as suggested above, can be seen (either physically or in the mind’s eye), heard, sensed or felt, and/or smelled. For example, clairgustance would be if a medium notices wafting pipe smoke and this immediately is accepted by the person receiving the message as confirmation of a loved one who enjoyed smoking a pipe.

⁴ *Mental Mediumship*—a more cerebral approach to spirit communication is “centered at the base of the brain, the seat of the cerebrospinal nervous system. The visiting spirit entity manipulates the mental faculties and causes the phenomena. The medium’s ability to receive and act as the vehicle for spirit communication depends on the medium’s physical, emotional, and receptive state. The deeper the meditational trance, the greater the intensity. *Physical Mediumship* is dependent on three things: focused trance via the base of the brain; the solar plexus area where the core (gut-level) of intensity cycles with the brain; and third, from the vibrational energy received from the sitters and observers. Physical mediumship is ‘state-of-the-art’ mediumship, and all experts at this level usually have surpassed the abilities of straight mental mediumship.” (Dreller, pp. 39-41)

sense internally (either psychically or telepathically) which can come in the form of a visual message that s/he can see in the physical or “mind’s eye”; or that which is audible, which s/he can hear either internally or externally. Physical mediumship is comprised of spiritual gifts that have some sort of “physical” property associated with them—that which can be seen, felt, or touched in the physical. “Precipitated Spirit Portraits” fall into the category of “physical mediumship.”

At the turn of the 19th century, the “Campbell Brothers” of Lily Dale Assembly (New York) fame, and the notorious “Bangs Sisters” of Chicago, Illinois who frequently summered at historic Camp Chesterfield (Indiana), were the foremost demonstrators of the physical psychic phenomena of precipitated spirit portraits. Not without their detractors and skeptics who maintained that this type of physical mediumship is somehow faked, both sets of spirit-artists were routinely accused of fraud on numerous occasions, even being formally charged and taken to court. Many critics at the time theorized as to how the Campbell Brothers and Bangs Sisters perpetrated their alleged chicanery with elaborate and sometimes far flung explanations that involved very intricate and nearly impossible adroitness to create their precipitated portraits, but none were ever convincing enough to deter the true believers who paid handsomely for an opportunity to have a spirit portrait sitting, and who maintained categorically that what they witnessed and received from these world-renowned spirit artists, were anything but authentic and genuine examples of physical phenomenon.

The Bangs Sisters

Elizabeth (Lizzie) and May Bangs were renowned Spiritualist mediums who specialized in clairvoyance, direct writing, and their most sought after and most notable gift—“precipitated spirit portraits.” Hailing from Chicago, Illinois, they travelled extensively around the region and beyond, taking up temporary residence in the Spiritualist camps of Lily Dale, in New York, and Camp Chesterfield, in Indiana during their very colorful and controversial careers as mediums.



Figure 2: Bangs Sisters: Elizabeth (left) and May (right); circa late 1890s at Lily Dale Assembly, New York. Courtesy of the *Lily Dale Museum*.

May and Elizabeth were both born in Chicago to Edward and Meroe Bangs who were originally from Maine. May was born in 1862 and Lizzie, as she was called, in 1859. They had two brothers, Edward and William, and there is no legitimate documentation

of them having had any mediumistic gifts. Mr. Bangs, it was said, was a tinsmith and stove repairman by trade and the mother tended to the family. ...Elizabeth was married in 1877 to John Paul, had two girls, and was divorced in 1888. May was married in 1884 to William D. Gaudsen, had one son, and eventually divorced. She was married again at least two [more] times and the press had a field day with all of the marital drama surrounding one of the famous “spook” mediums. (Heargerty, 3)

Not so lucky in love, the sisters can best be compared to Hollywood starlets today who are followed by the paparazzi and who are reported upon incessantly by gossip tabloids. The Bangs Sisters seemed to attract attention for not only their unique form of mediumship, but also for their tumultuous personal lives. This, however, was no deterrence to either of them as they continued their mediumship throughout their lives and the many marriages between them.

Having been gifted since childhood with paranormal gifts, such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, direct writing by typewriter, slate writing, automatic writing, and materializations, the sisters’ foray into “precipitated spirit portraits” did not begin until 1894. The other mediumistic gifts they practiced throughout their teen years and early adulthood were precursors to their most notable mediumship gift—precipitated spirit portraits—which made them famous. Initially, the Bangs Sisters would need several sittings in a darkened, curtained off area with the client in order for a portrait to appear, but as they honed their gift they eventually were able to manifest portraits in a matter of minutes in broad daylight with numerous people witnessing their work unfold before their eyes.⁵

The Gift of Precipitated Spirit Portraiture⁶

As mentioned earlier, precipitated spirit painting is a spiritual gift that falls into the category of physical phenomena where Spirits purportedly paint ethereally a portrait of a loved one who passed away.

The following description offers a brief explanation as to how this was done by the Bangs Sisters when at Camp Chesterfield:

...two identical, paper-mounted canvases in wooden frames were held up, face to face, against the window with the lower half resting upon a table, and the sides held by the [Bangs] sisters with one hand [each]. A short curtain was hung on either side, and an opaque blind was drawn over the canvasses. The light streamed in from behind the canvasses which were translucent; and after a quarter of an hour, the outline of shadows began to appear and disappear as the invisible artist made a preliminary sketch; then the picture began to grow at a feverish rate. When the pictures were separated, the portrait

⁵ A number of eye witness accounts, as well as affidavits [for an example of a sworn affidavit, please see Appendix 2] are a part of historical record regarding the Bangs Sisters’ mediumship and precipitated portraits. Although accused of fraud on numerous occasions, and even being arrested formally for humbuggery, the sisters never were found to have faked their precipitated portraits. Many skeptics and critics theorized as to how they could have faked their portraits but no one was ever successful in proving outright fraud of the precipitated paintings. The Bangs Sisters were caught doing nefariously suspect mediumsrip using other tools during séances and circles. For a detailed listing of eye witness accounts, affidavits, and fraud-related charges, see N. Riley Heagerty’s *The Mediumship of the Bangs Sisters: Portraits from Beyond* chapters 2 and 4.

⁶ It should be noted that “precipitated spirit portrait artists” are unique and different from “spirit artists” in that the latter are actually done by human hands, and are divinely inspired by Spirit; and sometimes these artists are in trance and their hands are guided by unseen forces to create spirit art images of people who are no longer living. “Precipitated” portraits, like those done by the Bangs Sisters and Campbell Brothers, were done completely by Spirit with no physical, human intervention other than merely being present at the sitting. (de Lafayette, 33-37) Please see Appendix 3 for examples of the Bangs Sisters’ precipitated Spirit portraits.

was found on the surface of the canvas next to the “sitter.” Though the paint was greasy, and stuck to the fingers upon being touched, it left no stain on the paper which covered closely the other canvas. Later, the works of art were openly precipitated as if by airbrush, and some took as little as five minutes to complete and only one canvas was used. (Swann, 3)

The Bangs Sisters’ phase of precipitated spirit portraits skyrocketed them to fame, but they were not without their detractors who were convinced that they somehow faked this form of physical phenomenon. A number of critics and naysayers theorized as to how they were able to somehow substitute a completed portrait with a blank canvas (even to suggest the sisters were able to hide a completed portrait under one of their dresses and then do a “bait and switch” during the session). Many of these portraits are life-sized or nearly life-size, so this seems unlikely. Another theory maintained that the sisters covered the portraits in layers upon layers of transparent silk and slowly would pull off a layer that gradually revealed the image. This technique would be difficult to pull off in front of eye-witnesses as it is reported that those in attendance would see eyes open and then close on the canvas, as well as articles of clothing to first appear, or transform completely, then sometimes disappear; not to mention the yards and yards of silk which would be needed to perfect this elaborate deception and to then be hidden from view of those in attendance.

In August of 1963, an article by the art gallery curator (at the time) for the *Hett Art Gallery and Museum* at Camp Chesterfield, Ralph Hicock, appeared in the Spiritualist publication *Chimes*. The account was originally contained in another publication entitled *The Light of Truth* in September 1905. The following is a report of an eye-witness account of a Bangs Sisters’ séance where a precipitated spirit portrait was produced:

The picture was made at the Chesterfield Camp grounds through the mediumship of the Bangs Sisters. Telling about the picture, Mr. Payne said it was made in the daytime, in an ordinary room not darkened, with the frame containing the canvas sitting on a stand before the window. Mrs. Charles Payne and Mrs. John Weesner, who did not believe in Spiritualism, were with him, sitting within five feet of the picture, and the two Bangs Sisters sat on either side of the table, supporting the frame, each with one hand. No paint, brushes, crayon, or other substance of any kind was used, and it was light enough to have seen a pin on the table. The Sisters had never seen or heard of his father, nor a photograph or likeness of him. All they asked was that he fix his father’s features in his mind. The picture was not made in spots or a little at a time. At first it was a faint shadow, then a wave appeared to sweep across the canvas and the likeness became plainer. It was a great deal like a sunrise that became brighter and brighter until it became perfectly plain and every feature visible. Until the picture was completed, the eyes were closed, and then all at once they opened like a person awakening. It did not take more than a half hour, and he stated it was the best picture, or likeness, of his father that he had ever seen. Mr. Payne was a man whose word nobody would dispute. He would not go alone to have the picture made, but took with him his sister-in-law, Mrs. Charles Payne, and her neighbor, Mrs. John Weesner, neither of whom have ever been, and were not then believers in mediums or in Spiritualism. (p. 18)

Were the Bangs Sisters genuine and sincere in their mediumship and truly gifted having no physical hand in creating their precipitated spirit portraits...or were they charlatans who somehow figured out an ingenious method to create what appeared to be miraculously precipitated portraits out of thin air? Interestingly, there are official reports and articles containing enough evidence to suggest that at some point in their mediumship, they did resort to trickery in their slate writing...but they were never definitely

found to be faking their gift of precipitated spirit portraits. There are many published accounts of people who truly believed in their gift (like the example above); and the sisters were required on more than several verified occasions to produce a precipitated portrait under “test conditions” of the day (which, of course, was done well before infrared cameras or other modern technological advances were invented that could possibly easily detect any trickery or underhanded manipulation to create their portraits).

True believers were never convinced that the Bangs Sisters were anything but truly gifted mediums who had a unique ability to connect with Spirit to somehow produce lifelike portraits of loved ones who had passed away for those left among the living. Skeptics, however, rejected any and all eye-witness accounts maintaining that the paintings defied all logic and a science-based understanding of the known world that had to have been manipulated in some way by human hands.

A Spiritualist having faith in the paranormal and mediumship is not much different from a mainstream Christian religion adherent having faith in the miracles and unexplainable events that are found in the Bible. Perhaps it comes down to an experiential component and those who did witness the work of the Bangs Sisters would never be convinced otherwise of its authenticity...and for those who did not experience it for themselves can never imagine it being possible.

Epilogue

My interest in the “Bangs Sisters” and their precipitated spirit portraits dates back to around the mid-1990s when I visited Camp Chesterfield in Indiana for the first time and toured the Hett Art Gallery and Museum. In the center gallery of this small museum, there was a huge collection of portraits (some small and others life-sized) of people in dress from around the turn of the century. I recognized only one of the people portrayed: Queen Victoria of Great Britain. When I inquired about who painted these and who the subjects were, the docent educated me on the gift of precipitated portraits and the mediumship of the very renowned “Bangs Sisters” who summered at Camp Chesterfield during the height of their mediumship.

Admittedly skeptical, it was difficult for me to accept the official explanation of how these were somehow manifested out of thin air by spirit hands without any human intervention. I could not help being attracted, however, to the serene beauty and genteelness of these portraits. I found myself returning often to the museum on visits home from Japan, and specifically the gallery where they are housed, to study them intently and to admire them with an open mind.

Regardless of whether one believes that these works of art were painted by human hands through some form of trickery perpetuated upon unsuspecting believers who paid dearly to have a loved one’s likeness appear on the canvas, or if they in fact appeared out of thin air through the authority of otherworldly entities, the quality and attention to detail cannot be ignored or denied. They are outstanding works of art that have museum quality uniqueness and appeal.

In 2005, I purchased the cottage where the Bangs Sisters lived at historic Camp Chesterfield. This only reinforced my desire to learn more about them as Spiritualists and their singularly unique form of mediumship that includes precipitated spirit portraits. I am often asked if I sense their spiritual presence in the home, and I have to say that at times I do. I have witnessed several examples of physical phenomena in the home—fleeting apparitions in the room where the portraits were often precipitated and the distinct and unmistakable floral scent, possibly gardenias, sometimes wafting through that same room. Could these phenomena be related to the Bangs Sisters? Of course, I cannot say so with absolute certainty, but I would like to think so as it is comforting to think that the sisters’ essence and energy remains in the home and they come back to visit from time to time.

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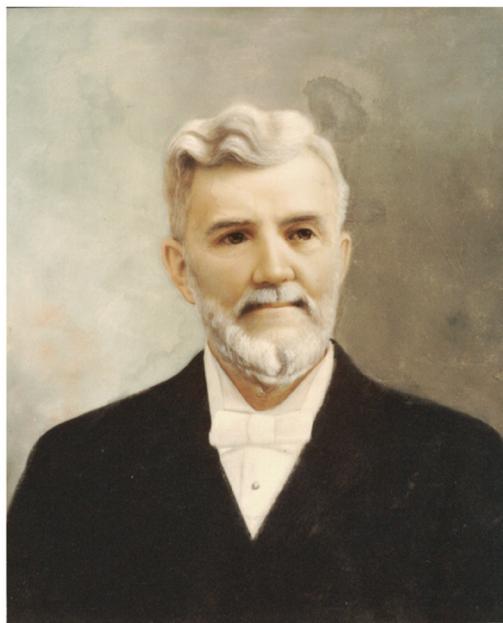
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Appendix 1: Mental and Physical Mediumship

Mental	Physical
Clairvoyance: Vivid mental pictures.	Ectoplasm: Diffuses from orifices of the medium's body—mucous membranes; intense trance.
Clairaudience: Hearing messages.	Telekinesis: Objects move through mind power.
Prophecy: Information received from spirits usually concerning future events; can be personal or great events.	Psychokinesis: Objects move and float because of mind <i>control</i> .
Srying: Clairvoyant receives visions from gazing in [a] crystal ball or water.	Spirit Raps: Spirits bump, bang, and rap furniture, walls.
Healing: When positive spirit energy is sent through the medium to heal and cure.	Apports: Spirits bring objects from their plane—flowers, living animals and objects relevant to séance.
Psychometry: Information obtained from handling objects, mainly through clairvoyance and telepathy.	Levitation: Persons, furniture, and objects float or rise.
Trance: Deep hypnotic condition in which the medium is controlled by a spirit guide—but not possession.	Materialization: Spirit produced; appears to be solid by sight and touch; can be spirits or objects.
Automatic Writing and Drawing: When a spirit operator manipulates the muscle reflexes of the medium.	Voices: Direct or indirect voices, comes from the medium, apparition, or “thin air.”
	Spirit Lights: Singular or hundreds of twinkling lights—all shapes and colors.
	Breezes and Drafts: Cold, warm or scented, from spirits.
	Musical Instruments, Singing: From spirits.
	Table Tipping: Spirit(s) move or rock table back and forth.
	Ouija Board: Messages come from Spirit(s).
	Odors: Flowers, medicines, perfumes, or stench.
	Spirit Photography: Spirit images appear on film.
	Telephone, Radio, Television, or Tape Recorder Voices: Spirit voices.

(From Dreller, L. (1997) *Beginner's Guide to Mediumship*. York Beach, Maine: Sam Weiser, Inc.)

**Appendix 2: Sworn Affidavit by Witnesses of the Bangs Sisters'
Precipitated Spirit Portrait of Alex Park McKee**



"Rebecca Fowler, granddaughter of Alex Park McKee and lifelong resident of Camp Chesterfield, reported that the portraits she witnessed would start with the eyes forming first on the canvas. Then the face would fill in, along with the clothing. The background would then be completed as the final portion of the portrait, the entire work of art being precipitated, as if by airbrush, in full view of the sitters.

Many of the spirit portraits were precipitated under test conditions, with sworn letters received from the sitters. Letters cited by Mr. James Coates in his book 'Photographing the Invisible,' published in 1911, include Vice Admiral W. Osborne Moore of England; Judge Levi Mock of Dufton, Indiana; Louis B. Leach, President of Wamego State Bank of Kansas, and many others.

On August 20, 1909, the [above] precipitated picture of Alex Park McKee was produced by the Bangs Sisters under test conditions as outlined below:

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**Sworn Affidavit:**

**Chesterfield, Indiana, August 21, 1909**

**State of Indiana, Madison S.S.**

**Tom O'Neal, President of the Indiana Association of Spiritualists; James Millsbaugh, Vice President of said association; Lydia Jessup, Secretary of the association; and Rebecca McKee, J.M. Walker, S.L. Louiso and Lewis Johnson, Trustees of the Association, being duly sworn, upon their oath depose and say: that on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1909, they were present at a séance held by the Bangs sisters under test conditions, for these affiants above to receive a portrait of some former member of said**

association, deceased, which portrait is to become the property of the said association, to be hung in the auditorium; that the affiants witnessed the development of said portrait, which portrait they recognized as the portrait of Alex P. McKee, a former member and Treasurer of the said association; that said picture was developed on canvas, or stretcher on a frame, which stretcher and frame were selected by one of the affiants from an assortment of such articles, all similar in form and appearance, without any suggestion or indication from the said Bangs sisters; that said portrait developed on said canvas or stretcher in a period of eight minutes within the full view of all these affiants, in daylight; and affiants further say that they are firmly convinced that said portrait was so developed by spirit powers solely, and that no human, earthly agency contributed to the development of said portrait. The said affiants recognize in said portrait the exact likeness of the said Alex P. McKee.

**Tom O’Neal, President**

**Rebecca L. McKee**

**James Milspaugh, Vice President**

**S.J. Louiso**

**Lydia Jessup, Secretary**

**J.M. Walker**

**Henry Bronnenberg, Treasurer**

**Lewis Johnson**

**Trustees**

**Subscribed and sworn to before me, on this 21<sup>st</sup> day of August, 1909.**

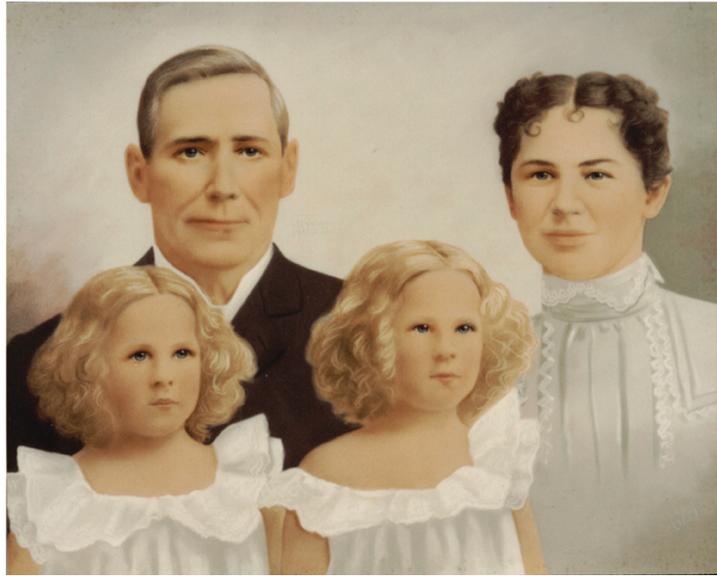
**William Rowland, Notary Public**

**My Commission expires March 15, 1913**

[Taken from Harrison, P. (1986) *Chesterfield Lives: Our First Hundred Years—1886-1986*; pp. 55-56]

### Appendix 3: Precipitated Spirit Portraits of the Bangs Sisters

Acknowledgements: The illustrations included in Appendix 3 are reproduced here courtesy of the *Hett Art Gallery and Museum*, at Camp Chesterfield (under the auspices of the *Indiana Association of Spiritualists* (IAOS)), Chesterfield, Indiana.



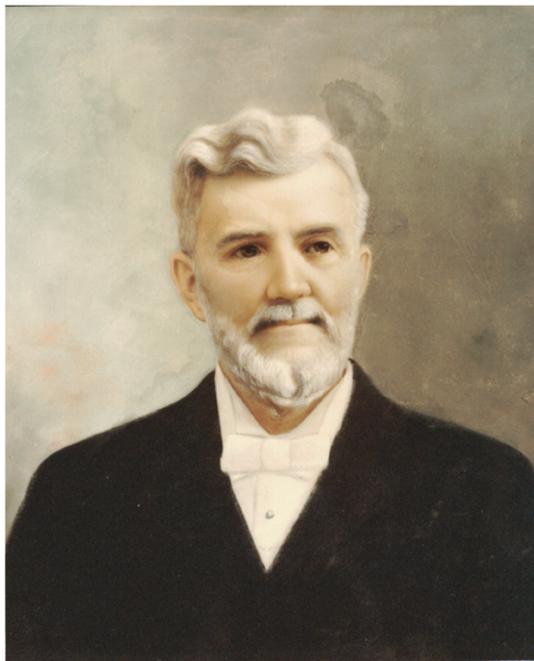
**(0287) Twin Portrait:** “Dr. Daughtery attended the Science Church of Spiritualism in Richmond, Indiana in the early 1920s. He sat for the portrait of his wife, Lizzie and she appeared; he asked why the twins, Mary and Christina, could not come, and they then appeared. Dr. Daughtery was not in spirit, but was sitting for the portrait. He was a member of the official board in Chesterfield in its pioneer days. This precipitated picture is through the mediumship of the Bangs Sisters.” (Swann, p. 23)



**(0290) Don Keeler:** “...was drowned in the White River, just at the rear of Camp [Chesterfield], while visiting here with his parents. This dramatic passing gave added significance to his spirit return and portrait, as he proclaimed that he still lived. He was known to all the young people of camp at the time. He was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Keeler of Fort Wayne, Indiana. The portrait is through the mediumship of the Bangs Sisters.” (Swann, p. 15)



**(0292) Bernal Tobias:** "Son of Addie and Henry Tobias, nephew of Mable Riffle. Died at the age of four on Christmas Eve. This was precipitated at the Bangs Sisters' cottage at Camp Chesterfield. The canvas was placed in front of a window with black draperies on either side. A cloud appeared and then took form. The blouse was different, and when told this the sitters were informed to take it home and at an appointed time to sit in concentration, and the shirt that is now visible appeared. The eyes were closed, but opened and closed several times." (Swann, p. 20)



**(0293) Alex Park McKee:** "This precipitated spirit portrait of Mr. A.P. McKee was received at a public demonstration in the auditorium at Camp Chesterfield in the early 1900s. The mediums were the Bangs Sisters. They asked the audience to concentrate on whose portrait they wanted to appear. Mr. McKee was a founder and early member of the Camp. (Swann, p. 6)



(0298) **Queen Victoria:** Portrait of Queen Victoria of England was received by Dr. Carson of Kansas City for his gallery in his home. The mediums were Elizabeth and May Bangs.



Left: (0300) **Rose Carson:** Made for Dr. Carson of Kansas City in 1894, Rose was his second wife.  
Right: (0299) **Emily Carson:** Dr. Carson's first wife, Emily. Precipitated in 1894 by the Bangs Sisters.

