

# DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

## QUARANTINE EDITION

### APRIL 20, 2020: [SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHERS](#)

Some people believe that you can speak to ghosts and spirits. Is it really possible? But a more pressing question: can you get them to hold still for a selfie?

#### THE STORY

In 1848, [two sisters from Hydesville, New York](#) spread word that they heard mysterious rapping noises on the walls and furniture of their home, and could speak with spirits through tapped code. An enthralled public declared the girls spirit mediums, and over the years household seances, lectures, even Spiritualist “churches” formed a movement – one that survived and grew even after one of the Fox sisters admitted that their spiritual “conversations” were total fluff, the noises no more than dropped apples and cracking their toes under the table.

From the Victorian era on, the promise of ethereal guests was titillating party fare, and social gatherings often featured Ouija boards, seances and mediums. The photographer William Mumler went gangbusters with this eager audience, delighting spiritualists with ghostly portraits that professed to prove, definitively, the existence of spirits among us. (For a fee, naturally.)

The New York police were less enamored – particularly after someone recognized one of the photographed “ghosts” as a man then very much alive – and eventually brought fraud charges against Mumler. The ensuing trial was such a sensation that the New York Daily Tribune reported regularly from the packed courtroom, headlining “Spiritualism In Court.” No less than P.T. Barnum was called as a witness.

Mumler was acquitted due to lack of evidence, and spiritualism’s appeal faded – until an early 20<sup>th</sup> century resurgence, when the devastation of World War I and the influenza pandemic had people wondering, once again, if they might contact loved ones in the hereafter. Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

#### DISCUSS:

Why do you think spiritualism caught on so well and so quickly?

Do you think it is possible that there are spirit realms of information or communication?

What is the role of science and law in debunking junk claims?

Who would you want to take a spirit photograph with?

Hi, I’m Betsy. Stuck at home? Let’s learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

**Questions? Comments? Say hello.**

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#### READ MORE:

“[The Man Who Photographed Ghosts](#),” The Iris (Getty)

“[The Photographer Who Claimed to Capture Abraham Lincoln’s Ghost](#),”

The New Yorker

David Jaher, [The Witch of Lime Street](#)

“[How to Photograph Ghosts](#)” (1894),  
New York Public Library