

# SPIRIT WORLD

**A visit to two villages that still share the nineteenth century's conviction that we can communicate with the dead**

**By Stephan A. Schwartz**

We walk down a street that seems lifted from a Victorian era children's book and there, on the white clapboard cottage's wall, is the small sign we have been told to look for: "Mrs. Hanson, Medium". Reverend Hanson, as she is properly known, answers the door and there, behind her, is Mr. Hanson. In what can only be called a front parlor, sitting in an open necked short-sleeve white shirt reading his paper. We are invited in, but only my wife Hayden can enter the reading room, lest "your vibrations" disturb the clarity of Mrs. Hanson's focus. On the left of the entrance to her Reading Room, pinned to the wall, is her Certificate of Ordination from the International General Assembly of Spiritualists, and her Florida State business license, entitling her to give readings from her home.

Psychic "channeling" did not begin in America with James Van Praagh, and Jonathon Edwards, and the New Age movement we know today is really only the most recent iteration of a feature of America's religious and spiritual landscape that traces back to our colonial past. Nor did the country's fascination with communes and "intentional" small communities start with the 60s.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there were villages -- sometimes called "camps" or "colonies" -- dotted across the nation devoted to the practice of the same metaphysical disciplines in vogue today. Some were permanent from the beginning, others were inhabited only during "seasons", and most have disappeared or, like the Chataugua circuit, are only remnants of a larger past. We know of utopians such as the Shakers because their lovingly preserved buildings and their furniture which touches us with its beautiful, economical, style. But we have only a removed sense of the communities as living centers. In contrast, their less well-known cousins, the villages of the American Spiritualist Movement, are still to be found, as I discovered, tucked away here and there across the land. Two of them, Lilly Dale, New York and Cassadaga, Florida are remarkably

well-preserved examples of American camp style.

Lilly Dale - formally, The Lilly Dale Assembly - founded in 1879, is located on 175 acres in Chatagua County in upstate New York not far from the shores of Lake Erie. Built along the banks of a small lake one mile from the town of Cassadaga and Highway 60, it is the mother of all Spiritualist communities in America, and describes itself as "the world's largest center for Spiritualism." In parallel with its cousin, Chatagua Village, which is about a half hour away in the town of Mayville, Lilly Dale began as an assembly building around which tents on platforms were erected for the summer season, when families gathered to hear speakers and ministers. By the 1880s, these had become permanent structures notable for their small scale, gingerbread scrollwork, and encircling screened-porches; homes built in a time before television and air conditioning, when sitting on your porch in the dark talking with friends was an appreciated pleasure. The streets are narrow and tree shaded but, as I go through the gates, it is obvious that the New York weather over a century has taken its toll and, while some cottages are pristine, others are in what realtors euphemistically call a "fixer upper" state.

Susan Glasier, office manager for the assembly, who answered my many questions, tells me that the town is still seasonal, "although we have a permanent population of about 275 people. Our season runs from June 25<sup>th</sup> to September 5<sup>th</sup> and, during that time, the population doubles. "Visitors are always welcome," she adds, and about 20,000 a year do stop by. There seem to be less than a dozen the day we are there at the height of the season.

The nostalgic architecture though is not the first thing that catches my attention. It is the small signs hanging in cottage gardens that say things such as "Kitty Osborne - Medium."

This is a religious village; its residents are practitioners of their faith's principal sacrament, "the demonstrated fact of communication, by the means of mediumship with those who live in the Spirit World" - those who are physically dead. Spiritualists are a branch of one of America's founding religious impulses, Transcendentalism. In these solidly American theological woods, are found Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain and, some say based on eye-witness accounts, Abraham Lincoln.

Lilly Dale is a company town, the land owned by the Lilly Dale Spiritualist Church, the houses on 99 year leases. It practices a cottage industry whose products are readings, New Age treatments, and energetic healings. There are between 10 to 15 mediums -- individuals "sensitive to vibrations from the spirit world." -- in permanent residence, with the number growing to 40 during the season. Many more in Lilly Dale are healers. Most carry the title Reverend, and are ministers in one branch or another of the Spiritualist Church, a community of believers, as old as the Mormons.

In the middle of the town, there is an auditorium, an unusual wood frame structure with wooden walls -- panels really -- that allow it to be opened to the outdoors. At the back is a green and white stained glass window reading "Memory of my Mother." Below the window is a small mirror with black writing over its silvery surface. It says, "This temple erected by B.F. Barlett and dedicated in remembrance of his mother Obera Bartlett." There is no one there, as I walk around, but a woman passing by tells me to come back at 2:30 for the open public service, when there will be a talk, and someone will channel.

Nearby is a "Healing Temple," where a laying-on-of-hands

technique similar to those taught today has been practiced for more than a century. Next to it is a school. Like most middle-class people of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the residents of Lilly Dale had great respect for education, and the Andrew Jackson Davis Lyceum, one of the town's largest buildings, attests to this conviction. Largely forgotten today, Andrew Jackson Davis in his time was a major celebrity, author, lecturer, at 60 awarded an M.D.. He was also the founder of the Lyceum School system which began here in Lilly Dale and became a big part of these cooperative communities. But, most of all, the newspapers of the age describe Davis as an impressive clairvoyant and medium. When he spoke he drew great crowds.

The tree-shaded narrow streets invite walking. The Spiritualists, with their explicit belief in the kinship of all life, had been abolitionists, and would be supporters of women's suffrage. But it is their passionate environmentalism that is reflected in their town planning.

After a short walk there is a clearly special little grove of trees, distinct from the rest. Sacred Groves are one of humanity's most ancient places of worship and instruction. By Roman times, the sacred groves of the Etruscans -- almost always

oaks -- were already legendary. In this one, in the middle, there is a large old tree stump with stairs built up on one side. When a visitor to Lilly Dale was invited for a stump speech, it was meant quite literally. Visiting spiritualist ministers and speakers declaimed here, so many, and so vigorously, that the stump bears the wear of their boots. A little further on, there is the only brick building I have seen in the village. It turns out to be the Marian Skidmore Memorial Library. A look at its shelves reveals it must be one of the largest collections of Spiritualist literature in the country.

Winding along, the little lane leads to the lake, and a small white frame hotel, The Maplewood. It has 42 rooms costing between \$21 and \$44 a night. The only other place to stay within Lilly Dale is the Leolyn, just outside the gated grounds, but owned by Lillydale. It has 11 rooms for \$33 a night.

Two American flags fly from the Maplewood's porch, and entering the lobby, even more than the town, is a trip back into time. In the foyer there is a little sign that makes me laugh: "No channelling in the lobby." Oddly, there is no place to eat in the hotel, but a man sitting in one of the wicker chairs gives directions where to go.

There are two places for food in Lilly Dale, the "Good Vibrations" cafeteria, and a small coffee shop, "Monika's Delites" which specializes in Viennese coffees. By the end of lunch it is almost 2:30, and there is just enough time to get back for the Spiritualist service that is held every day at the same time during the 10 week season. Everyone is welcome.

The service begins promptly with a hymn, then an older woman comes out on the stage and gives us a trance sermon speaking in a kind of theatrical scotch brogue. It is designed to be uplifting, but the thing that affects me the most is that the idea of a woman lecturing in a trance seems quite unexceptional to the audience of 75 or so. Then there is some organ music and an older man introduces another woman in a floor-length lime green high necked gown with lace. There are mostly woman in the congregation, but with a good sprinkling of men, and one of them leans over and explains to me that this lady is the "Message Minister."

The woman on stage speaks about the "spirit side of life" and, then, begins going through the audience. She has little "messages", from the dead, which she passes on. As I listen to her I say to myself, "If this lady is for real, I'd like to receive a message from Gil, a close friend

from my boyhood who committed suicide in his mid-30s. For the man sitting in front of me the woman talks about someone named Paul with whom he will do business. When she passes on, I lean over and ask if what he has heard makes any sense. He says he has just talked with a man named Paul who represented a salvage company with which he was considering working. For another man she seems less on, saying something about his singing (which he tells her he does not do). Just at the end she comes back to me and says she sees something about a boat, then a friend 'on the spirit side who took his own life in youth."

Sometime later, on a trip south, my wife Hayden and I leave Georgia and cross the Florida border, and head down near Orlando to Lilly Dale's southern sister, Cassadaga. As we leave the main highways, the glaring tourist patina of the state falls away. We are in an older, quieter, more ramshackle, but to us, more appealing Florida. On Interstate 4, there is no offramp marked "Cassadaga". But a helpful general store owner tells me to look for Exit 55, "Lake Helen". After you leave the highway, he tells me, "follow the signs a few miles."

The name is a Seneca Indian word meaning "Rocks beneath the

water". I don't know the importance of that, but the choice of a Northern Native American word, I suspect, was to show the connection with the mother community and its nearby town of Cassadaga, New York, as well as to affirm the Spiritualists' strong identification with Native Americans, whose cause they championed. Many 19<sup>th</sup> Century mediums also channelled Indians, whom they claimed provided the information they passed on.

Less than 20 years after its own founding in 1894, Lilly Dale's members, participated in the founding of this Florida "camp". They built it on land donated by a wandering clairvoyant medium, George Colby, and it covers 55 acres today, with privately held land around its periphery. For decades Lilly Dale readers used Cassadaga to escape the rigorous New York winters, and there is still an exchange between the two communities, although they are now completely separate.

There is a sense of *deja vu* when we arrive. It is Lilly Dale with tropical vegetation. The same short tree-lined streets, the same cozy architecture. The same little signs that hang like an old fashioned country doctor's placard from lamp posts and stakes in front of many of the houses: "Rev. Janie Henderson Owens - Spirit Guide

Drawings; Patti Aubrey - Certified Medium; Dr. Warren Hoover - Spiritual Counselor and Teacher Metaphysics, Certified by SCSCMA." These are the crofters of Cassadaga.

Most are elderly, grandmaws and grandpaws looking much as Norman Rockwell saw them. I hadn't fully appreciated this while in Lilly Dale, or maybe it is clearer in Cassadaga. These are villages of the elderly and the single young, with only a sprinkling of the middle-aged, and few young marrieds with children. As in Lilly Dale, no one in Cassadaga seems to have much money, but they appear to have a gentle long-lived quality of life. Like Lilly Dale, Cassadaga also has a lake and, overlooking the lake at the edge of the town is a white cement garden table and chairs. Affixed to the middle of the table is a neat bronze plaque reading, "A gift *from* (the emphasis is mine) Julia Slater on her 100th birthday, August 25, 1996."

Hayden, and I get into town and go straight to the Cassadaga Hotel, the only place to stay within the village. It has one of those long screened porches that are so inviting. They began building the hotel, which has 20 rooms and five suites in 1927, and it is remarkably intact and true to its origins. Rooms currently go for \$60 a night

whether single or double. Most have four posters, with a sink in the room, and the toilet and shower in a kind of closet. The hotel also has the only place to eat we can find in town, The "Lost in Time Café, situated at one end of the lobby. The home-made biscuits are better than all right, and the salads are big with fresh ingredients. Lunch is simple, cheap, and better than road food.

Hayden, decides she would like a reading. Although the hotel has mediums on call, and the Cassadaga Spiritualist Psychic Therapy Center -- one of several centers in town -- advertises "5 Mediums on Duty," we decide to go for the mother stream. So, after lunch, we go across the street to the Andrew Jackson Davis Building which is older than the hotel, and which houses the Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association.

Inside the Davis Building, we find a bookstore with lots of books by modern consciousness writers, as well as obscure early spiritualist books little seen in the modern New Age, but on much the same subjects.

At one end of the bookstore, there is a white board with the magic marker names of those mediums on duty, along with their telephone numbers. When I ask how one

decides which to pick, the woman behind the counter says, "Have you ever had a kind of gut feeling? A sort of knowingness? Well there you go. That's part of your own psychic functioning. Everyone has it, and we encourage you to use it." End of subject; I can't think of anything to say to that.

Hayden selects Helen C. Hanson. The woman behind the counter calls, and we are told to walk down to the end of the block and turn left. We'll see the sign. It will be \$40 for half and hour. (Prices range from \$25 for a 15 minute short reading, to \$60 for an hour; each practitioner negotiates for her or himself.)

Thirty minutes later, Hayden emerges thanking Mrs. Hanson. As we walk away she says, "I wanted to see if she could talk to one of my grandparents, but I got a 'fat lady, with nice hands.' It was no one I could imagine. Still, I'm glad I did it. Later that night, in a conversation with her mother, Hayden learns of a stout aunt who had doted on her as a child, but died when she was little more than a baby. She was, in her mother's words, "very vain about the beauty of her hands."

In 1831, just before the Transcendentalist flowering that produced so many of these villages began, Alexis Charles Henri Clérel

de Tocqueville scion of one of the oldest Norman noble families in France arrived in the United States, accompanied by his close friend Gustave de Beaumont. Tocqueville saw and, more importantly, appreciated that the crux of our democracy was the capacity for change, and the conviction that every person was entitled to live out what they believed. He wrote, "They [the Americans] have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man...; they consider society as a body in a state of improvement, humanity as a changing scene, in which nothing is, or ought to be, permanent; and they admit that what appears to them today to be good, may be superseded by something better tomorrow." Simple places like Lilly Dale, Casadaga, and the other intentional communities became one expression of that deeply American drive, and the heritage they left us extends far beyond their endearing cottages, and wooded pathways.

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