

Spirit Rapping Unmasked: An 1851 Investigation and Its Aftermath

The Fox sisters' spirit-rappings were investigated and explained by three Buffalo physicians. The faithful ignored and suppressed the exposé.

Vern L. Bullough

THE MODERN spiritualist movement began in 1848 at Hydesville in Wayne County, New York, when J. D. Fox, his wife, and their daughters became much disturbed by unexplained knockings in the house to which they had recently moved. The knockings, which apparently had occurred before the Foxes lived in the house but never on such a scale, caused a considerable stir in the village.

Various theories were advanced to explain these mysterious happenings, none satisfactory until one of the daughters, Katherine (Kate, b. 1830) concluded that the cause of the sounds was intelligent and if this was the case she should be able to communicate with it. Acting as a "medium" she, and later her younger sister Margaret (b. 1836), established communication with the rapper through flipping her fingers a specific number of times. The rapper responded with the same number. A code was worked out with one rap meaning no and three yes, and more complicated messages could be obtained by calling out or pointing to letters of the alphabet. Through this means the sisters learned that the rapper was the spirit of a peddler who had been murdered in the house.

Shortly after this Katherine and her sister Margaret moved to Rochester to live with a married sister, Mrs. Ann Leah Fish. The move did not cut down their ability to communicate with the spirit world, and their rapping sessions not only continued but began to attract large audiences. Soon their sessions had overflow crowds. As their fame grew,

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The Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate, with the third sister, Leah.

such notables as Horace Greeley, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant came to visit and reported on the ability of the sisters.

Encouraged by such success, the sisters took their show to nearby Buffalo in 1851, where "crowds of visitors" paid \$1.00 a head to watch the wonderful revelations about the next world unfold. Attending one of the first Buffalo sessions were three physicians from the University of Buffalo, Austin Flint, Charles A. Lee, and C. B. Coventry. They reported on their observations in a letter to the editor published in the February 17, 1851, issue of the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*.

The letter, slightly modified, along with a report of the full-scale investigation undertaken by the physicians, was then printed in the March issue of the *Buffalo Medical Journal*, of which Flint was editor. Flint urged other newspapers to use the report in the journal as the official text of the letter and of the report of the committee. This article is based upon the information contained in that report.¹ The letter read as follows:

To the Editor of the Commerical Advertiser:

Curiosity having led us to visit the room at the Phelps House in which two females from Rochester (Mrs. Fish and Miss Fox) profess to exhibit *striking* manifestations of the spiritual world, by means of which communion may be held with deceased friends, &c., and having arrived at a physiological explanation of the phenomena, the correctness of which has been demon-

strated in an instance that has since fallen under observation, we have felt that a public statement is called for, which may perhaps serve to prevent further waste of time, money, and credulity (to say nothing of sentiment and philosophy) in connection with this so long successful imposition.

The explanation is reached almost by a logical necessity, on the application of a method of reasoning much resorted to in the diagnosis of diseases viz: *reasoning by way of exclusion*. It was reached by this method prior to the demonstration which has subsequently occurred.

It is to be assumed, first, that the manifestations are not to be regarded as spiritual, provided they can be physically, or physiologically accounted for. Immaterial agencies are not to be invoked until material agencies fail. We are thus to *exclude* spiritual causation in this stage of the investigation.

Next, it is taken for granted that the *rappings* are not produced by artificial contrivances about the persons of the females, which may be concealed by the dress. This hypothesis is excluded, because it is understood that the females have been repeatedly and carefully examined by lady committees.

It is obvious that the *rappings* are not caused by machinery attached to tables, doors, etc., for they are heard in different rooms, and different parts of the same room, in which the females are present, but always *near* the spot where the females are stationed. This mechanical hypothesis is then to be *excluded*.

So much for *negative* evidence, and now for what *positively* relates to the subject.

On carefully observing the countenances of the two females, it was evident that the sounds were due to the agency of the younger sister, and that they involved an effort of the will. She evidently attempted to conceal any indications of voluntary effort, but in this she did not succeed:—a voluntary effort was manifest, and it was plain that it could not be continued very long without fatigue.

Assuming, then, this positive fact, the inquiry arises, how can the will be exerted to produce sounds (*rappings*) without obvious movements of the body? The voluntary muscles are the only organs (save those which belong to the mind itself) over which volition can exert any direct control. But the contractions of the muscles do not, in the muscles themselves, occasion obvious sounds. The muscles, therefore, to develop audible vibrations, must act upon parts with which they are connected. Now, it was sufficiently clear that the *rappings* were not *vocal* sounds: these could not be produced without movements of the respiratory muscles, which would at once lead to detection. Hence, *excluding* vocal sounds, the only *possible* source of the noises in question, produced, as we have seen they must be, by voluntary muscular contractions, is in one or more of the movable articulations of the skeleton. From the anatomical connections of the voluntary muscles, this explanation remains as the only alternative.

By an analysis prosecuted in this manner, we arrive at the conviction that the *rappings*, assuming that they are not spiritual, are produced, by the action of the will, through voluntary muscles, upon the joints.

Various facts may be cited to show that the motion of joints, under certain circumstances, is adequate to produce the phenomena of the

rappings; but we need not now refer to these. By a curious coincidence, after arriving at the above conclusion respecting the source of the sounds, an instance has fallen under our observation which demonstrates the fact that noises precisely identical with the *spiritual rappings* may be produced in the *knee joint*.

A highly respectable lady, of this city, possesses the ability to develop sounds similar both in character and degree to those professedly elicited by the Rochester imposters from the spiritual world. We have witnessed the production of the sounds by the lady referred to, and have been permitted to examine the mechanism by which they are produced. Without entering, at this time, into a minute anatomical and physiological explanation, it is sufficient to state that, owing to relaxation of the ligaments of the knee joint, by means of muscular action, and pressure of the lower extremity against a point of resistance, the large bone of the leg (the tibia) is moved laterally upon the lower surface of the thigh bone (the femur) giving rise, in fact, to partial lateral dislocation. This is effected by an act of the will, without any obvious movement of the limb, occasioning a loud noise, and the return of the bone to its place is attended by a second sound. Most of the Rochester rappings are also double. It is practicable, however, to produce a single sound, by moving the bone out of place with the requisite quickness and force and allowing it to slide slowly back, in which case it is noiseless.

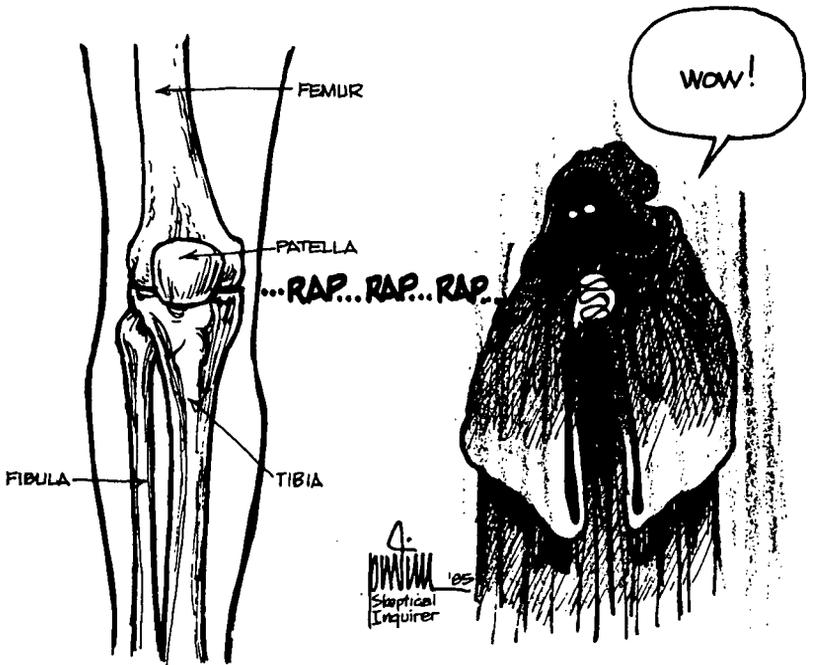
The visible vibrations of articles in the room situated near the operator, occur if the limb, or any portion of the body, is in contact with them at the time the sounds are produced. The force of the semi-dislocation of the bone is sufficient to occasion distinct jarring of doors, tables, etc., if in contact. The intensity of the sound may be varied in proportion to the force of the muscular contractions, and this will render the apparent source of the rappings more or less distinct.

We have witnessed repetitions of experiments in the case just referred to, sufficient to exhibit to us all the phenomena of sounds belonging to the Rochester rappings, and without further explanations at this time, we append our names in testimony of the facts contained in the foregoing hastily penned exposition.

Feb. 17, 1851	University of Buffalo	} AUSTIN FLINT, M.D. } CHARLES A. LEE, M.D. } C. B. COVENTRY, M.D.
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The Fox sisters could not let such allegations go unanswered and on the next day inserted the following announcement in the Buffalo papers:²

We observe by a communication in the *Commerical Advertiser*, that you have recently made an examination of a highly respectable lady of this city, by which you have discovered the secret of the "Rochester Imposters." As we do not feel willing to rest under the imputation of being imposters, we are very willing to undergo a proper and decent examination, provided we can select three male and three female friends who shall be present on the



occasion. We can assure the public that there is no one more anxious than ourselves to discover the origin of these mysterious manifestations. If they can be explained on "anatomical" and "physiological" principles, it is due to the world that the investigation be made, and that the "Humbug" be exposed. As there seems to be much interest manifested by the public on this subject, we would suggest that as early an investigation as is convenient would be acceptable to the undersigned.

Ann L. Fish
Margaretta Fox

The three physicians agreed to set up an examination and met with the two women and their friends on February 19, 1851.

After a short delay, the two Rochester females being seated on a sofa, the knockings commenced, and were continued for some time in loud tones and rapid succession. The "spirits" were then asked "whether they would manifest themselves during the sitting and respond to interrogatories." A series of *raps* followed, which were interpreted into a reply in the affirmative. The two females were then seated upon two chairs placed near together, their heels resting on cushions, their lower limbs extended, with the toes elevated and the feet separated from each other. The object in this experiment was to secure a position in which the ligaments of the knee joint should

be made tense, and no opportunity offered to make pressure with the foot. We were pretty well satisfied that the displacement of the bones requisite for the sounds could not be effected unless a fulcrum were obtained by resting one foot upon the other, or on some resisting body.

The company, seated in a semi-circle, quietly waited for the *manifestations* for more than half an hour, but the "spirits," generally so noisy, were now dumb. The position of the younger sister was then changed to a sitting posture, with the lower limbs extended on the sofa, the elder sister sitting, in the customary way, at the other extremity of the sofa. The "spirits" did not choose to signify their presence under these circumstances, although repeatedly requested so to do. The latter experiment went to confirm the belief that the younger sister alone produces the *rappings*. These experiments were continued until the females themselves admitted that it was useless to continue them longer at that time, with any expectation of *manifestations* being made.

In resuming the usual position on the sofa, *knockings* very soon began to be heard. It was then suggested that some other experiment be made. This was assented to, notwithstanding the first was, in our minds, amply conclusive. The experiment selected was, that the knees of the two females should be firmly grasped with the hands so applied that any lateral movement of the bones would be perceptible to the touch. The pressure was made through the dress. It was not expected to prevent the sounds, but to ascertain if they proceeded from the knee joint. It is obvious that this experiment was necessarily far less demonstrative, to an observer, than the first, because if the bones were distinctly felt to move, the only evidence of this fact would be the testimony of those whose hands were in contact with them. The hands were kept in apposition for several minutes at a time, and the experiment repeated frequently, for the course of an hour, or more, with negative results: that is to say, there were plenty of *raps* when the knees were not held, and none when the hands were applied save once, as the pressure was intentionally somewhat relaxed (Dr. Lee being the holder), two or three faint, single *raps* were heard, and Dr. Lee immediately averred that the motion of the bone was plainly perceptible to him. The experiment of seizing the knees as quickly as possible when the knockings first commenced, was tried several times, but always with the effect of putting an immediate *quietus* upon the *manifestations*.

The proposition to bandage the knees was then discussed. This experiment was objected to, on the part of the friends of the females, unless we would concede that it should be an exclusive test experiment. We were not prepared with appliances to render the limb immovable, and therefore declined to have it considered such a test. This was the experiment anticipated, and one which, we presume, the females thought would end in their triumph. A bandage applied above and below the patella, admitting of flexion of the limb, will probably not prevent the displacement, as we have but little doubt had been ascertained by the Rochester females before the examination was invited. Should it become necessary to repeat experiments in other places, in furtherance of the explosion of the imposition, we would suggest that the bandage be not relied upon. Plenty of roller, with lateral splints, firmly applied, so as to keep the limbs extended, and render the

joints immovable, would doubtless succeed in arresting sounds so far as they involve the knee joint. It will be observed that, in our exposition, we do not claim that this joint is exclusively the source of the sounds, and had our experiments, which were first directed to this joint, failed, we should have proceeded to interrogate, experimentally, other articulations. This, however, as the reader will note, seemed quite unnecessary. The conclusion seemed clear that the *Rochester knockings* emanate from the knee joint.³

Flint, the author of the article in the *Buffalo Medical Journal*, went on to add a number of other cases of individuals who could make sounds with their joints. He wondered how the Rochester sisters were able to keep their secret so long when the ability to make such sounds was so widespread and concluded that people believed because they wanted to believe.

In an April update in the same journal on the Rochester sisters, Flint reported that they

continued to hold daily and nightly soirees [in Buffalo] which were well patronized until the 25th [of February], when they rather suddenly took their departure for parts unknown. Shortly after the secret of the knockings was announced, there was a change in the performances. The knockings now became a secondary matter, and the "spirits" were pleased to ring bells, gongs, play on the banjo, kick tables, chairs, etc., to select and admiring audiences.⁴

In spite of the disillusion of many with the knockers, enough believers in the city remained to continue to fill the hall. The sisters, however, allowed no more investigators into their act, and when a young "gentleman" in attendance tried to look beneath the table to see whether the women were now kicking the cymbals, gongs, and banjos, he was expelled from the audience.

By all rights of rational thinking, the Buffalo experience should have ended the saga of the Fox sisters. It did not. Instead, the Buffalo exposé was deliberately ignored or suppressed by the growing band of spiritualists. Besides, the Fox sisters put on a good show. In 1856, a New York enthusiast put it bluntly: "Come, let us go in and see Kate Fox. It will cost you nothing; Good show; cheap."⁵

In 1852-53, Kate Fox took her act to London, where, as Mrs. Hayden, she continued to enthrall audiences and kindled interest in spiritualism all over England. Later, in the 1870s, she became disillusioned with what she was doing and denounced spiritualism as humbuggery.

Every so called manifestation produced through me in London or anywhere else was a fraud. Many a time have I wept, because, when I was young and innocent, I was led into such a life."⁶

The faithful ignored her denunciation and instead denounced her as so

sodden with drink that her outbursts had to be dismissed. The Society for Psychical Research in their later publicity glossed over the fact that Mrs. Hayden was one of the Fox sisters, and instead listed her as a Boston spiritualist. Though the society mentioned the possibility of snapping one's knee, they indicated that such an explanation was highly unlikely, and refused to accept the findings of Flint.⁷

In 1888, Margaret Fox Kane, who also denounced spiritualism as a fraud, explained that the original sounds had been made by tying an apple to a string and pulling it down the stairs. Later Kate, and soon after Margaret, found that they could make the same sound by snapping their toes. Flint therefore was technically in error but correct in principle. His experiment, especially when their legs were extended on the sofa, would have detected this. The sisters allowed no further experiments later in their career.⁸

In sum, sometimes the more things change, the more they seem the same. Believers who want to believe *will* believe regardless of what the evidence might indicate.

Notes

1. Austin Flint, "Discovery of the Source of the 'Rochester Knockings,'" *Buffalo Medical Journal*, 6 (1851): 628-642; the letter is reprinted from pp. 631-632. In the introduction to his account Flint reports that he had hit upon the solution to the knockings through a friend whose wife was able to do the same thing.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 634.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 634-636.

4. Austin Flint, "Rochester Knockings," *Buffalo Medical Journal*, 6 (1851): 699-700.

5. Ronald Pearsall, *The Table Rappers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), p. 65.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

7. For a good example of this, see Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick, "Spiritualism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25, 705-708. This is the famed eleventh edition of the *Britannica*, published in 1911. Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick was secretary to the Society for Psychical Research, and this article unlike most articles in this particular edition did not give pros or cons but treated spiritualism as a real phenomenon subject to scientific investigation, which the society supposedly had done. Even today's believers in psychic phenomena would be embarrassed by the distorted view it gives.

8. Joseph F. Rinn, *Searchlight on Psychical Research* (London: Ridder & Co., 1954), pp. 60-61. ●