

Free Love, Universal Reform and Fraud: The Economics and Transformation of American Spiritualist Camp-Meetings in the Nineteenth Century

By John Patrick Deveney

***Theosophical History Occasional Papers*
Volume XIII**

The origins and transformation of spiritualist camps in the United States in the last 40 years of the nineteenth century are illustrative of the development of American spiritualism itself. The camps grew out of the back-to-nature, Chautauqua and lyceum movements of the pre-Civil War period and thrived until the 1890s. There were hundreds of camps and they cumulatively attracted several hundred thousand visitors a year in the heyday of the movement in the early 1880s. The camps were a boon to spiritualism and its otherwise vagrant and transient professionals, and their business model provided the first successful model for spiritualism in America and created a class of impresarios and entrepreneurs who quickly realized the advantages to be gained from land-development schemes and tie-ins with providers of transportation, entertainment and provisions. The camps brought together crowds of believers to be serviced by all the prominent mediums and lecturers of the time, who vied with each other—and increasingly resorted to fraud and theatricality—to attract increasingly jaded audiences to their tents or bungalows.

In their origins in the 1850s the camps were simply one more example of the participation of spiritualism in the common front of "universal reform" that characterized the new era instituted at Hydesville—abolition, free thought, food and dress fads, vegetarianism, pacifism, temperance, feminism and woman's suffrage, marriage reform, "free religion," education and medical reform, secularism, utopian socialism, etc., etc. It was frequently impossible to distinguish "reform" from spiritualism in the early camps, and many proudly boasted the sponsorship of the camps by both movements. This common front ended in the 1870s when the "radical" reformers in the spiritualist movement overplayed their hands in the national convention movements and attempted impose radicalism—especially in the form of "free love"—on spiritualism and the camps. The resulting backlash was fatal to the united front of reform and spiritualism and saw the blacklisting of most of the radicals from the prominent spiritualist journals and camps and the sundering of the spiritualist movement from the increasingly secularized reform of the end of the century. In the process spiritualism lost most of the intellectual stimulation, excitement and sense of progress towards a glorious new era that had characterized the early movement, and left the camps the resort of fraudulent mediums, endlessly communicating their tired messages, and of people seeking a rural summer vacation spot. By the 1890s, the camps turned increasingly from the idea of the spirits "out there" in the Summerland to the reality of man's inner spiritual nature and its "unfoldment" during this life, a transformation that marked the subsuming of old-fashioned spiritualism under the burgeoning New Thought movement.

PUBLICATION DATE: July 2, 2012

PRICE: \$27.00 plus postage