

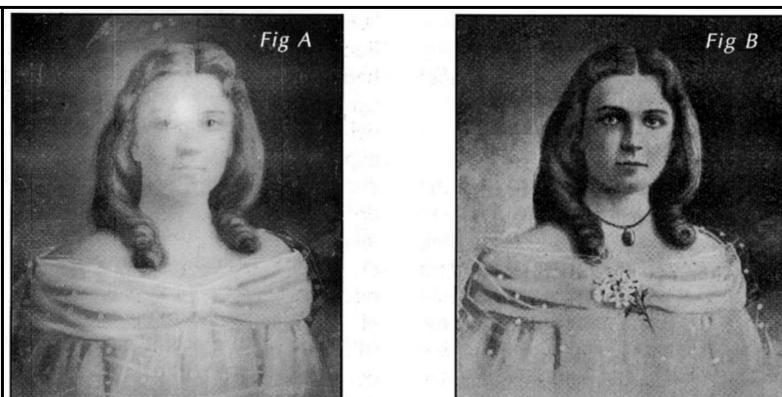
The Mediumship of the Bangs Sisters and an examination of their precipitated Spirit Portraits. Part I. By N. Riley Heagerty

It is August, the year is 1911. A large audience has filled to capacity the auditorium at the world famous Chesterfield Spiritualist Camp in the State of Indiana, America. They have come to witness a demonstration of psychic power, one of the most unique and marvellous in the entire world. A select committee has arranged beforehand that upon entering the building, all have been given a numbered ticket, the stub of which is torn off and put into a large vat to be thoroughly mixed up; later on, one stub will be randomly drawn from the collection. Now, after a close examination by the committee to see that there are no markings or paint of any kind, or signs of chemical treatment, a large plain canvas is placed on an easel in the centre of the stage. The spirit mediums who will demonstrate the phenomena now enter the auditorium, they are sisters and appear to be about 35 to 40 years of age. Both take their seats on the rostrum, one situated on each side of the easel and clearly four to five feet from it; they will never touch the canvas throughout the entire demonstration.

A member of the committee now reaches in and selects from the vat one ticket stub and reads the number aloud to the audience; it belongs to a Mrs Alice Alford. Mrs Alford and her husband are now invited to come up and take a seat on the stage; they will be sitting for a portrait but in this particular instance the painting will not be of the Alford's; the artist and the subject of this session are from another dimension; the world of Spirits.

When all is ready, the mediums slowly bow their heads and close their eyes as if in prayer and deep concentration; the silence in the auditorium for five straight minutes is so absolute that the air itself seems to stand still. Suddenly, many in the audience lead forward in their chairs, sitting rigidly, their eyes tense and fixed on the canvas, from which a thin, vapour-like cloud, or shadow it seems, sweeps across it, pulsates, and then flickers out. After a few more tense moments, shades of definite colour begin to appear, as if successive layers of fine dust have been thrown, or precipitated on to the canvas to form a cloudy background and this also seems to pulsate and flicker and then quickly disappear. On and on it goes for several minutes; the other-worldly artist it seems, is making preliminary sketches, and trying out different colour schemes. Suddenly, all at once, the background slowly and steadily now precipitates into view; clearer and clearer it comes, only this time with it there is an astounding addition; three pairs of eyes have suddenly appeared on different parts of the canvas; two pairs of which are open and the last, situated directly in the centre of the canvas, are closed. The two open pairs immediately disappear and the closed eyes remain only to also instantaneously disappear; the audience gasps in astonishment.

With each successive phase of the unfolding phenomena, the background becomes clearer and clearer and now, a faint outline of a face and bust slowly precipitates itself into view, disappearing and reappearing several times before remaining in focus on the canvas. It is the unmistakable likeness of a young girl, perhaps 14 to 15 years old: many in the audience are now standing, some pointing in wonderment. Gradually, the appearance becomes more clearer and more distinguishable; she is transcendently beautiful and her hair, clearly auburn brown, falls luxuriously to her bare shoulders, revealed by the white dress she is wearing having been pulled down. Around her neck she is wearing a black onyx teardrop necklace, and pink roses surround the top of her dress as embroidery. Her eyes are closed.



The Audrey Alford Portraits

(Continued from page 1)

With the portrait now having been completely precipitated on to the canvas, to the utter and absolute astonishment of all, the eyes suddenly open, and the audience thunders in applause. To the front of the stage now steps the Alford, clearly shaken by the experience, and Mr Alford announces to the gathering that the portrait is an exact likeness of their deceased daughter, Audrey. The Alford, as it turns out, are a prominent family of Marion, Indiana, are not Spiritualists in belief, and this was their first visit to Camp Chesterfield. Mrs Alford wore around her neck, hid from sight, a locket containing a photograph of her daughter almost duplicate in likeness of the spirit picture obtained, but different in poise and position. The mediums had not seen the locket picture or any photo of the child, nor had they ever made the acquaintance of the Alford. The finished portrait was precipitated on to the canvas in twenty-two minutes. The spirit mediums of this extraordinary event, *The Bang Sisters*.



Within the vast and marvellous records of American physical mediumship, one of the most outstanding chapters belongs indeed, to the turn of the century mediums, the Misses Elizabeth S and May E Bangs, of Chicago, Illinois. Their gifts included above board, independent writing in broad daylight (mostly slates), and independent drawing and painting; all forms of fully developed clairvoyance, materialisation's, and direct voices, but their most wondrous and spectacular phenomena was that of precipitated spirit portraits in full colour.

In researching these mediums, three things initially and not surprisingly, stand out. First, like the majority of the most powerful and famous physical mediums from this country, many of whom were the highest ranking in Spiritualism, they too lived and developed their many gifts within the Great Lakes region of the

North-eastern United States (see *The Spirit Zone Newsletter*, Aug 1994), a mystery zone of electrical energy in this section of the country said by the spirits themselves to be perfect for the manifestation of physical phenomena due to the great bodies of water and the dry, crisp atmosphere; the Bangs sisters' hometown of Chicago, Illinois is situated right on Lake Michigan, secondly that they were in fact, siblings, giving us yet another outstanding example of a genetically connected powerhouse of mediumistic force.

*Other examples of this type of 'industrial strength' mediumship which comes to mind is of course the Fox sisters, the brothers Davenport, the Misses Moore, the Eddy brothers and family, the Berry sisters, the Jonathan Koons family, the Misses Dunsmore and the list goes on, and thirdly, in the case of May and Lizzie Bangs, there is not one single definitive and complete book as far as I know, in existence about these sister mediums and I find this to be absolutely unbelievable considering the nature of their phenomena and the vast amount of years put in for the cause of Spiritualism and physical mediumship by these wonder workers.

Research material that I found had to be collected piece by piece and page by page over a long period of time. This in itself is very good research practice as it involves extreme patience like everything connected with physical mediumship does. I have had to work very very hard for every bit of research material I have ever uncovered, some has involved years; make no mistake though, it is always a labour of love and I attribute all I know of this wonderful subject to perseverance and persistence; a continuing unfolding process, the education which automatically comes when one is patient while following the trails of truth.

With most of our most famous physical mediums there is nothing recorded of their early, childhood lives; the very beginnings of their visions, sights and sounds, an area I find to be one of the most blessed and wonderful, in many cases, has simply been lost to the ages. With the Bangs Sisters I was fortunate to find one source containing information on their early days.

'Transcendence In Oil (The Bangs Sisters)', *The National Spiritualist*, July 1, 1940. Who were these miracle-working women? Born of a typical American family named Bangs, they were reared in average American surroundings. These sisters, Lizzie and May, were scarcely past toddling age when they began astonishing the neighbourhood with phenomena of a very unusual sort.

Pieces of coal falling seemingly from the ceiling to the floor of their home - coal that bore no similarity whatsoever to any ever seen in the surrounding country - was one of the first visible instances of the girls' strange power. By their fourth or fifth years spirit rapping's, voices from the world beyond, and the moving of heavy pieces of furniture by invisible forces were within their grasp. Strange, indeed, for girls scarcely past babyhood, and certainly beyond comprehension of childish minds. They must have suffered more than their share of qualms at their difference from girls of the same age. Physical manifestations, such as materialisation's of hands, automatic writing, independent slate writing, full-form etherialisation, clairvoyance and clairaudience were by now almost daily occurrences. Within the next few years an even more remarkable ability was demonstrated by the sisters. Something no medium had ever achieved before - spirit communication by typewriter. Later, when word of the spirit paintings got out, Lizzie and May Bangs were now famous indeed.

This new power baffled the keenest intellects. The portraits reproduced were work of high order as well as excellent likenesses. The conditions under which the paintings were made precluded all possibility of deception. When one considers that an artist would require at least five hours to produce even a poor portrait, the fact that the Bangs portraits only required from twenty minutes to three hours becomes more astounding. (Less and less time was required as the mediumship developed - NRH) The story of the paintings and the history of the Bangs girls were headlined in papers and magazines throughout the country. Fakirs and magicians tried to imitate the performance. They came, were unmasked, and passed in steady procession. Sceptics reversed their opinions and wrote favourable notices. Meanwhile the sisters carried on quietly and serenely, unmoved by the storm raging around them. Such headlines as: 'The Facts of Immortality Verified' left them unmoved. They had a job to do and they did it. Caring nothing for the poms and vanities of this world, they wasted no precious time on shams. They lived comfortably but simply. Their lives were dedicated to helping others: the needy, the sick in body and soul. With only a strand of hair, or perhaps a message locked tight between slates - mute pleas of supplication from aching hearts - to help them, the sisters were able to bring what had seemed forever gone into the light of day. Countless were the thousands who received comfort and happiness in this way. Many famous men and women who travelled to their doors to criticise, left singing hymns of praise.

The Bangs Sisters, according to themselves, and from what I have gathered were mediums from the time they were born: the phenomena revealed itself throughout their entire childhood and, thanks to the sympathetic and understanding nature (obviously) of their parents, friends and the Spiritualists, they were not 'burned at the stake' and their glorious gifts were able to be fully developed and thousands were helped because of it.