Sheldon exhibit conjures spirits, fun

Museum explores those who claimed to talk to the dead

By JOHN FLOWERS


Oh, and since they were all deceased, Jewett didn’t even need to open his door; as spirits, they all drifted in through the walls and hovered above his head.

And he had the photos to prove it.

Jewett’s “spirit photos” and other otherworldly keepsakes are now on display at Middlebury’s Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History. They’re part of an exhibit titled “Conjuring the Dead: Spirit Art in the Age of Radical Reform,” on view through Jan. 11, 2020.

The exhibit, curated by the Sheldon Museum’s Eva Garcelon-Hart, shouldn’t be perceived as a showcase of one man’s eccentricities. Rather, it serves as a prime example of spiritualism during the 19th century, a movement that led to progressive thought and that fueled efforts to end slavery and give women equal rights.

Jewett, by many historical accounts, was hard working, ambitious and a shameless self-

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Learn more about 19th century spiritualism

Several talks and other events are scheduled to coincide with the Sheldon Museum exhibit "Conjuring the Dead: Spirit Art in the Age of Radical Reform." Unless otherwise noted, they will take place at the museum, 1 Park St., Middlebury, and free with museum admission.

- Eva Garcelon-Hart on "Conjuring the Dead." Friday, Oct. 4, 3 p.m., The Residence at Otter Creek, 350 Lodge Rd., Sheldon. Sheldon Museum archivist and exhibit curator will talk about the Spiritualism exhibit currently on display.
- "Spiritual Vermont: Green Mountain Mediums, Mystics, and Miracle Workers." Thursday, Oct. 17, 7 p.m. Author and VPR commentator Joe Citro talk.
- "The Devil's Cabinet: The Eddy Family of Spirit Mediums." Thursday, Oct. 24, 7 p.m. Jason Smiley, independent researcher, talk.
- "Night at the Museum." Wednesday, Oct. 30, 6-9 p.m. Get ready to be spooked at the Sheldon Museum at an evening of ghosts and goblins by community members and other pre-Halloween entertainment. Free and open to the public.
- "By Seen and Unseen Hands: Spirit Artists and their Art in the 21st Century." Thursday, Nov. 13, 7 p.m. Champlain College Professor Stephen Wohlenberg talk.

Sheldon

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Born and raised in Weybridge, he became a successful sheep farmer and state legislator during the first half of the 19th century. He traveled throughout Europe displaying fine examples of his Merino sheep, including at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exposition in London.

"He was good at it." Garcelon-Hart said of Jevett's ability to talk up his livestock and himself.

The last half of the 19th century saw cow shows replace sheep as the preferred livestock in Vermont. So Jevett refined his business interests and at the same time cultivated what he saw as his special talents: Communicating with the dead and helping people as a "mesmeristic physician."

Jevett's claims of special, otherworldly powers would get him in and out of trouble during his eventful life.

Garcelon-Hart said Jevett was briefly imprisoned in New York City for reasons that are unclear, perhaps for a financial fix or a case of mysticism run amok. While in jail, a fellow prisoner named John Croatham appeared to have died in his cell, according to material in the Sheldon Museum archives.

Prison officials allowed Jevett access to Croatham's body. Jevett was able to "read" the dead man's bare feet against his chest and grabbed his lifeless hands, creating what was described as a "powerful magnetic circuit" that revived Croatham, according to an account in the Sheldon archives.

"From then on, he sees himself as a healer, and claims all sorts of powers," Garcelon-Hart said.

Jevett was married three times, ultimately to Mary Lockwood Allen, a Chittenango native who became one of the first woman medical doctors in the country. It was through Allen, Garcelon-Hart believes, that Jevett became intrigued by spiritualism.

Allen's hometown of Chittenango was known as the spiritual capital of the world during the 1860s and 1870s, Garcelon-Hart noted. The town earned that distinction, in part, because it was home to brothers William and Horatio Eddy. The Eddys were well-known mediums of their era, and claimed to have psychic powers and the ability to conjure spirits of the dead.

Jevett's period of belief that the living could communicate with the dead, and practitioners used sciences and a relatively new invention — photography — to "prove" it.

"Spirit photography" was born in 1861 when William Mumler — a Boston jeweler and photographer — took a self-portrait that revealed an ethereal image of someone behind him.

Those familiar with double-exposure and overlapping negatives knew the "spirit" photos could be manufactured. But a lot of folks of those era believed visions could capture both the living and dead. Jevett claimed to have been visited by famous historical and Biblical figures and "proved" those encounters through photos of himself encircled by disembodied apparitions. Those photos are part of the Sheldon exhibit.

"He had a big personality, and my feeling is, he truly believed in this claimed powers," Garcelon-Hart said. "He was not out to deceive people."

The world was at a different place during Jevett's era, and the conditions were ripe for people to make leaps of faith. Electricity and magnetism were relatively new. People couldn't see electricity, but they knew it was there. They trusted science and the ability of the camera to reveal what the human eye could not.

"Photography was seen as able to depict reality," Garcelon-Hart said. "All of a sudden, you can depict ghosts in photographs. So people really think this is proof that ghosts exist."

Spirit photographers could easily make two exposures on a single negative, manipulate the negative to create ghostly blurs, or overlap two negatives in the darkroom to produce an extra face within the resultant frame.

MYSTICISM VS. RATIONALISM

But the audience for spirit portraits in the mid-1800s was vast — even when trickery and fraud were proven, Garcelon-Hart noted. These images might appear to the contemporary viewer as clumsily executed studio images, but at the time they were a tangible symbol of the overarching argument of mysticism versus science and rationalism.

Spiritualism also coincided with the greatest period of carnage in the nation's history: The Civil War, during which thousands of families lost soldiers. Folks were willing to spend good money with a medium who might be able to connect them to a fallen loved one.

Some of the towering figures of the 19th century found themselves on opposite sides of spiritualism, according to Garcelon-Hart. Sherlock Holmes author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a believer, while escape artist Harry Houdini was bent on exposing mediums.

With western migration came exposure to new ideas and religions — like Mormonism, Millenarianism and Shakers. Spiritual leaders predicted the second coming of Christ, prompting followers to sell their possessions in anticipation of the Rapture that never came.

The Sheldon exhibit includes a transcript of testimony from a British woman who, during March of 1843, claimed to have been visited by Jesus and a ghost, who asked her to warn others that the second coming was near.

Melissa Warner of Bristol testified in March of 1843.

"Jesus Christ then gave his instructions... saying, 'You see, I am coming, you have advanced almost to the earth and shall soon be there, warn the impenitent of their danger, instruct them to prepare for my coming,'" Garcelon-Hart, Vermont's spirit of independence, became a hub for spiritualists.

"Ruralized in June of 1838 botted the 'Free Convention,' considered one of the most radical events of its time, according to Garcelon-Hart.

"People from all over the country came to discuss various issues, and among them was spiritualism, abolitionism, marriage reforms and all kinds of religious reforms," Garcelon-Hart said. "Local newspapers were bashing it. It was considered a convention of lunatics."

Jevett and his family would leave Vermont for Wisconsin and then California. He left all of his possessions related to spiritualism to the Sheldon Museum. They include a series of life-size pencil portraits depicting well-known historical and mythical figures, such as Jesus Christ and Mozart. The drawings were created by spirit artist Wella P. Anderson and his wife, Lizzie "Pete" Anderson, a medium. Those extremely rare original drawings are part of the "Conjuring" exhibit.

Garcelon-Hart believes the exhibit will have major appeal to county residents.

"It's a real historical moment," she said. "I don't think one should relate it to us or whether you believe (in spiritualism) or not. We just have to acknowledge it existed. There were beliefs that a large number of Vermonters had, and this collection is rich and interesting. I hope people will see it."

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