

FIRST DRAFT

THE GREAT DEBATE

Spiritualist versus illusionist: Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini in Colorado

In 1923, the debate over whether it was possible to contact the spirits of the deceased, and even take photographs of the spirits, was at its peak. The magazine Scientific American offered a \$2,500 prize for any spirit contact that could be scientifically verified. Mediums who claimed to reach departed loved ones were seemingly everywhere.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Two of the best-known men in the world were on opposite sides of the debate — one-time friends Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini. Conan Doyle was the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories and multiple other books, but by 1923 he was concentrating exclusively on attempting to prove the validity of contact with spirits. Houdini was the world-renowned magician and escape artist who had desperately wanted to contact dead family members and friends, but had gradually come to believe that every medium, every seance and every spirit photograph was a hoax. He could usually identify the trickery involved within a few minutes.

So, when the two mega-celebrities ended up by coincidence in Denver at the same time in May of 1923, people took notice. One article in the Rocky Mountain News, complete with photographs of the two men and spirit photos, provided a detailed look at their contrasting views on the subject. “Can the camera show us those who have passed beyond?” asks Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and answers his own question with an emphatic “Yes!” the newspaper wrote.

Harry Houdini responded, “Spirit pictures — I make them every night! It’s a great trick, if you know how.” The Daily Sentinel mentioned Conan Doyle’s presence in Colorado, but with sad skepticism about his mission.

“Sir Conan has given the world books worthwhile, and it is hard to believe that one who has contributed so much in the way of literature is now pursuing” a false goal, the paper wrote. “This great man [is] on a hopeless mission.”

One photo taken that spring in Denver indicates the two men were still amicable. It shows Conan Doyle and Houdini in the back seat of an open car, smiling at each other, while their wives look on. A sign in the background for the Mile High Photo Co. storefront confirms the shot was taken in Denver.

The pair appear friendly, despite their falling out over spiritualism. In fact, Conan Doyle wrote as much in his

book about his trip to Denver and the American West: “We met here the Houdinis. He had been performing in California and was now

on his way back,” Conan Doyle wrote. “We went in the evening to see him perform his usual marvellous and hair-raising feats, which

place him in a class by himself among illusionists.” On May 7, 1923, before a crowd of thousands, according to the Rocky Mountain

News, Houdini wriggled out of a police straitjacket while hanging upside down from a scaffold four stories above the street in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Denver.

Spiritualism had been popular throughout much of the 19th century. However, in the years after World War I and the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 to 1919, it really boomed.

Millions of people were eager to contact deceased loved ones, wanting to know that there was an afterlife and that those they lost were in a better place. Hence the proliferation of mediums and people like Conan Doyle, who had lost his own son during the war and was eager to promote spiritualism.

Although a long-time skeptic when it came to mediums and seances, Houdini had been, by his own admission, eager to believe when he first met Conan Doyle in 1920. He wanted to make contact with a number of deceased friends and relatives, most notably, his mother.

Unfortunately for the friendship, a 1922 seance led by Conan Doyle’s second wife convinced Houdini she was a fraud. Jean Doyle claimed to be contacted by Houdini’s mother and, through what was called automatic writing, she transcribed a 15-page letter from the mother to Houdini.

Houdini knew it was a hoax. The letter was written in perfect English, but Houdini’s mother only spoke Yiddish or German and a few words of English. Also, the letter included a Christian cross at the top of each page, but Houdini’s mother was the wife of a rabbi. She wouldn’t have used such a symbol to communicate with her son.

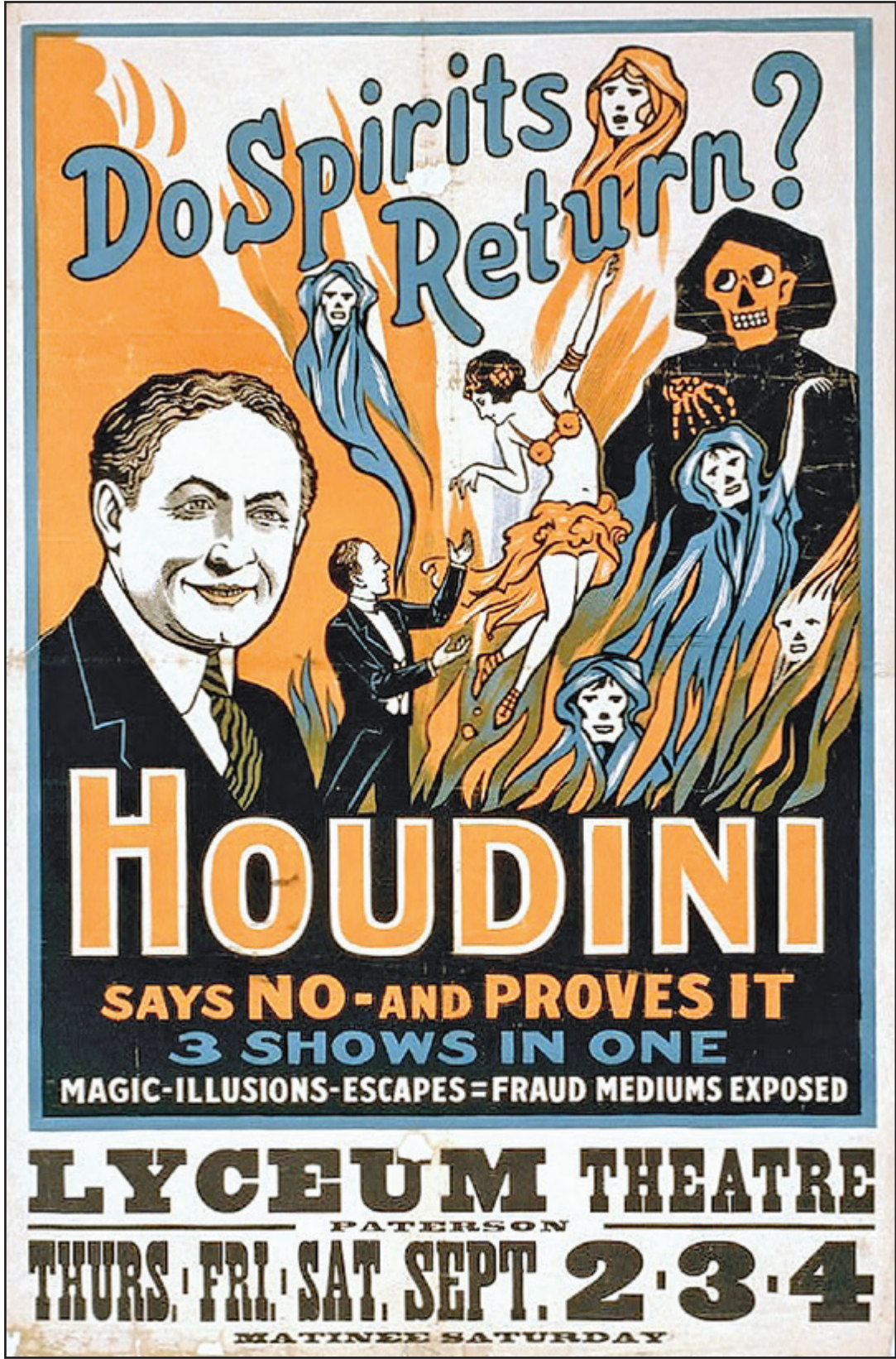
Houdini didn’t say anything immediately, but later in 1922 he attacked Jean Doyle as a fraud in newspaper stories published across the country. That created the rift between him and Conan Doyle that was never repaired, despite their seeming amicability in Denver in 1923.

Even so, Houdini made it clear he wanted to believe contact with the departed was possible. “There is nothing I would not give to be assured that I will see my mother and father and my old pals again and that they are where I can communicate with them now,” Houdini told a Denver magazine in 1923. But he said, he never witnessed a spiritualist event that “could not be duplicated by out-and-out

See **DEBATE**, page 16B ➔

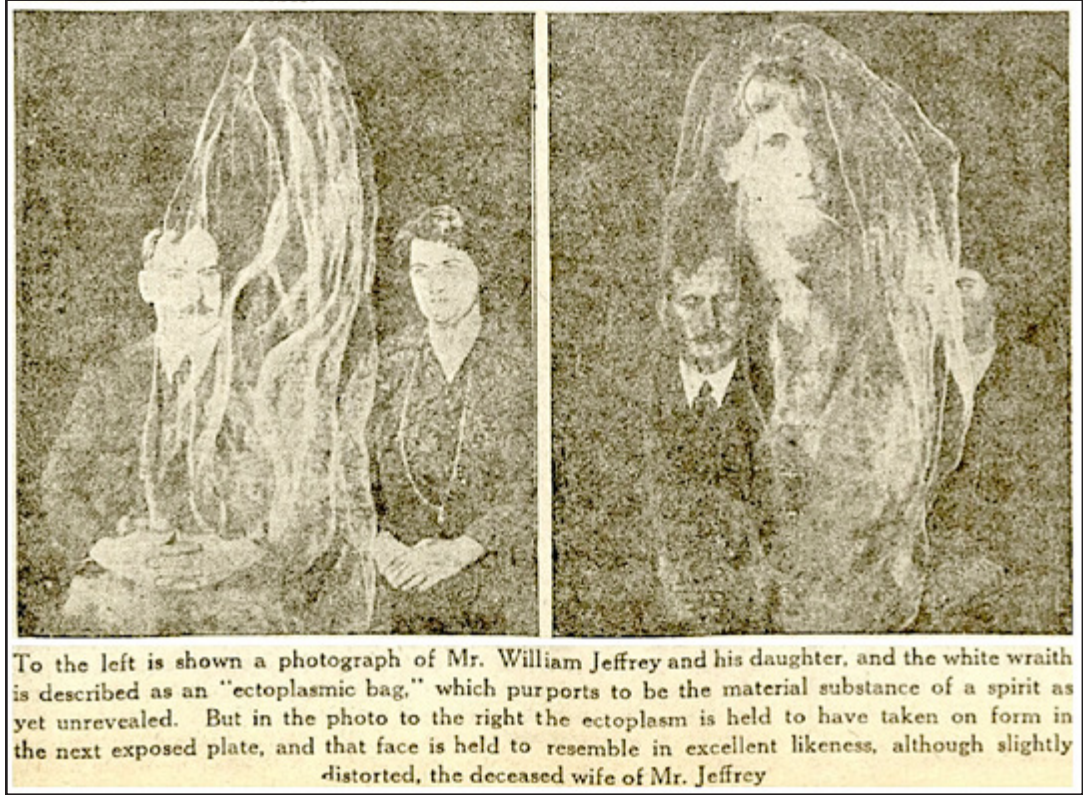
These photos, with the attached caption, appeared in the Rocky Mountain News in the summer of 1923 when the dispute over spiritualism was near its peak and Conan Doyle and Houdini represented opposite sides in the debate.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS/
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A poster from the 1920s highlights Houdini’s efforts to expose spiritualism frauds.



To the left is shown a photograph of Mr. William Jeffrey and his daughter, and the white wraith is described as an “ectoplasmic bag,” which purports to be the material substance of a spirit as yet unrevealed. But in the photo to the right the ectoplasm is held to have taken on form in the next exposed plate, and that face is held to resemble in excellent likeness, although slightly distorted, the deceased wife of Mr. Jeffrey



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