

PRUDENCE CRANDALL, SPIRITUALISM, AND POPULIST-ERA REFORM IN KANSAS

RODNEY O. DAVIS

WHEN PRUDENCE CRANDALL died on January 27, 1890, she was once again something of a national figure. She had spent 40 years of her life in obscurity in Illinois and Kansas, the last 13 in Elk county, Kansas, but her indemnification by the state of Connecticut in early 1886 had reminded the nation at large of the young Prudence's valiant but aborted effort to educate Negro girls in New England in the early 1830's.¹ Between her short-lived career as a teacher and her indemnification, she had married Rev. Calvin Philleo, a Baptist minister, lived on at least two farms in Illinois and one in Kansas and did actual pioneering in both states, and became widowed. In whatever locality she resided she was publicly visible, promoting such causes as antislavery, woman's rights, and spelling reform in Illinois, and woman's rights, prohibition, and spiritualism in Kansas.² Though best remembered nationally at the time of her death as a proponent of black liberation and human freedom, from what was said then and is said now, it is clear that Prudence Crandall was most notably perceived and is best remembered in Elk county as a spiritualist.³

Modern American spiritualism of the sort promoted and advocated by Prudence Crandall

has been interpreted rather negatively as a response to social stress in 19th-century America, as a reaction to pressures deriving from spatial mobility and the beginnings of industrialization.⁴ A fuller view of it, however, would show it to be the product of a culture in which both strong religious institutional restraints and an oligarchy of ideas or learning, were almost totally absent. The way was open then, for a variety of new speculations about man and his relationship with the infinite. Antebellum American perfectionism in its many resulting varieties emphasized what seemed to be the narrowing gap between heaven and earth, and modern spiritualism, another of the exuberant creations of New York State's Burnt-Over district, may well be thought of as the ultimate perfectionist persuasion.

A profoundly democratic belief, spiritualism was founded on a conviction of empirically demonstrated human immortality, made known to men in recent times by frequent episodes of communication with the spirit world. The gift of spirit communication was thought to be accessible to all persons, and it had been revealed that human understanding and moral enlightenment should progress, both before and after "death," to the point that ultimate truth would eventually be known to all. Man was considered the highest and noblest work of God, but God was thought to be present in all creation, omnipotent and omniscient. Such a belief could not tolerate a personal devil or a literal hell. Hell was considered inconsistent with God's omnipresence, and evil was simply the correctible consequence of the absence of the enlightenment of which all humans were capable. Spiritualism, then, could be quite abhorrent to orthodox Christians. Spiritualists also disavowed supernatural phenomena or miracles; they professed to regard God as a God of inviolable natural law whose divine omniscience could not tolerate such happenings. Finally, spiritualists tended to minimize the peculiarly divine na-

1. There is no adequate biography of Prudence Crandall. Edmund Fuller's *Prudence Crandall* (Middletown, Conn., 1972) essentially ends in 1834 and contains errors of fact; Elizabeth Yates's *Prudence Crandall, Woman of Courage* (New York, 1955) is fictionalized. For the publicity surrounding the indemnification, see John C. Kimball, *Connecticut's Canterbury Tale* (Hartford, 1886); Wendell Phillips Garrison, "Connecticut in the Middle Ages," *Century Magazine*, New York, v. 30 (1885) pp. 780-786; George B. Thayer, *Pedal and Path: Across the Continent Awheel and Afoot* (Hartford, 1887); Kansas City (Mo.) *Journal*, March 28, 1886; *Topeka State Journal*, March 29, 1886; *New York Times*, April 12, 1886; *The Lantern*, Topeka, January 15, 1887; Winfield *Tribune*, March 19, 1887.

2. For information on Prudence Crandall's life in Illinois, I am grateful to Mrs. Jessica Nashold of Mendota, Ill., whose great-grandfather was Crandall's nephew, and for two manuscripts by Crandall's grandniece Rena Keith Clisby, "Canterbury Pilgrims, a Story of the Crandalls, One of Whom, Prudence Crandall, Is the Heroine" (1949), and the "Personal Memoir of Rena Keith Clisby" (ca. 1959). Typescripts of both are at the Kansas State Historical Society.

3. Kansas City (Mo.) *Star*, January 29, 1890; Kansas City *Journal*, January 29, 1890. In Chicago, a Negro literary society was named the Prudence Crandall Club.—Prudence Crandall Philleo to the Prudence Crandall Club, March 21, 1886, letter in possession of Mrs. Jessica Nashold, Mendota, Ill. For the local spiritualist perception see Howard *Courant*, January 31, February 14, 1890; *Moline Republican*, January 30, February 7, 14, 1890. The current recollection is derived from interviews with Mrs. Orva Lyons, Elk Falls, July 19, 1971, June 30, 1978.

4. Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York, 1969), p. 78.

ture of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible or of a priestly class; indeed there were no spiritualist "prophets" since all humans were considered of God-like potential. Therefore spiritualists were individualists and difficult to unify; they never properly constituted a "cult," for each believer progressed toward perfection at his own rate. Their doctrine hindered them from acting collectively. Likewise it made it hard for them to purify their ranks of impostors.⁵

Possessing such a set of convictions, spiritualists were enthusiastic about the moral regeneration of humanity. They considered it the mission of each individual, in Andrew Jackson Davis's words, "to justly respect and wisely cultivate and direct the heavenly germ, the spiritual principle deposited in the soul."⁶ Social reorganization might be essential to the wholesale accomplishment of this, but the matter could not be one of prime urgency as spiritualists consigned no one to hell. Nonetheless they found slavery abhorrent; hence there were few spiritualists in the antebellum South. They were also vociferous in opposition to such things as Christian sabbath observance, for people should behave as righteously every day as they did on Sunday. They were advocates of equal rights for women, for as the nurturers and teachers of all humankind, "women will inevitably develop the world." They favored marriage reform, in the early years basically for eugenic reasons. And they abhorred the consumption of alcohol as raising an obstacle to humanity's progress to perfection.⁷ Such an optimistic, liberating persuasion, bolstered by what seemed to be overwhelming and systematically gathered

evidence in its favor, and combined with an enthusiasm for the regeneration of mankind, was peculiarly attractive to an impressive number of mid-19th-century friends of humanity. Horace Greeley, William Lloyd Garrison, Robert Dale Owen, Adin Ballou, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson were among a large group of reformers who were associated with spiritualism during the antebellum years.⁸

FOR PRUDENCE CRANDALL also to belong on such a list of notables is certainly consistent with her early history. When or exactly where she became a spiritualist convert is not precisely known, but her free-thinking Quaker background and the Unitarian influence of Rev. Samuel May in Connecticut might have prepared her to accept the belief. Her "adopted son," A. C. Williams, suggested that Crandall underwent a profound psychic experience at some time in her youth. And it is known that her husband, the Baptist Rev. Calvin Philleo, near the end of his life in Illinois, was mortified at Crandall's spiritualist involvement in their neighborhood.⁹

In Elk county, a congenially receptive reformism or even radicalism seemed for awhile to be present, almost uniquely so in southeastern Kansas, an area of which James C. Malin says there was "none more radical" in the state.¹⁰ Greenback, Union Labor, and eventually Populist politicians would all find the ground fertile there. In 1878, the year after Prudence Crandall's arrival, Elk was the only county in Kansas where the Greenback vote exceeded the Republican vote, and the victorious candidate for county superintendent of public instruction was not only a Greenback but a woman, Mrs. M. E. Nichols.¹¹ Though as the community grew older, "respectability" came to reside in the Republican party and main-line Protestantism, Elk, and neighboring Chautauqua county in subsequent years showed unusual sympathy for woman's suf-

5. It is somewhat audacious to generalize about spiritualist beliefs, but there seems to have been general agreement about the tenets indicated here. They are derived from Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia, Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual and Celestial Universe*, four vols. (New York, 1853-1856); John T. Edmunds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism* (New York, 1853); Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, two vols. (London, 1902); Robert W. Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet of American Spiritualism," *Journal of American History*, v. 54 (1967), pp. 43-56, is revealing, if mistitled. R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture* (New York, 1977) is an outstanding history of modern American spiritualism. Hal Sears, *The Sex Radicals* (Lawrence, 1977) shows the appeal of spiritualism to marriage reformers. James C. Malin's *A Concern About Humanity* (Lawrence, 1964), pp. 60-62, contains a sketch of spiritualist activities in Kansas in the post-Civil War years.

6. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, v. 1, p. 39.

7. See for examples *ibid.*, v. 2, p. 187; v. 3, pp. 232-242, 406-410, 414-415, 420; Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, v. 1, p. 169.

8. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, p. 71.

9. Clisby, "Canterbury Pilgrims," pp. 36, 42; A. C. Williams in *Moline Republican*, December 7, 1894; in *ibid.*, February 7, 1890. Rev. C. L. McKesson, who preached at Crandall's funeral, also refers to "a very peculiar experience" in her early life.

10. Malin, *A Concern About Humanity*, p. 56.

11. Howard *Courant-Ledger*, November 14, 1878.

frage, prohibition, and the Southern Negro exodus to Kansas.¹²

However, neither Prudence Crandall's reformism nor her spiritualist involvement became widely noticed in Elk county until about 1883, and though she was certainly at the center of community interest in spiritualism, that particular cause did not become a more broadly public one until the early 1890's, after her death. It is interesting to note the coincidence of the rather public appearance of spiritual enthusiasm in Elk county with the hard times of the 1890's, when old verities seemed under fire by Populist demands, and to ponder causal connections between them, but it is perhaps more to the point to inquire how meaningful this Elk county spiritualism was to the demands of the late 19th century. Did optimistic and liberating spiritualism still hold an attraction for reformers, and did it offer answers to the new questions about society and politics that were being asked?

One difficulty hindering historians of American spiritualism has risen from its noninstitutional nature. It has been almost impossible to study the individualistic spiritualists behaviorally or in the aggregate, and therefore necessary to focus on the pronouncements of particular spokesmen, primarily visible as spiritualists, or on the contents of spiritualist publications. In Prudence Crandall's circle in Elk county, however, were four individuals whose public activities were locally rather well documented outside the boundaries of spiritualism. In their cases at least, it is possible for us to investigate the impact of belief on the public lives of Americans who happened also to be spiritualists, and likewise to assess the relevance of that belief to a modernizing time and place.

THE SUSTAINED contact of only two of these people can be documented during Prudence Crandall's lifetime. They are Prudence Crandall herself, and her "adopted son," Abraham C. Williams, who came to live with

her late in 1882 or early the next year.¹³ But their interconnections with the others are numerous and the inferences obvious. Williams, for instance, purported to act as a sales agent for a book published by Thomas P. Fletcher, a third member of the group.¹⁴ Fletcher extended credit to Crandall when she came to Elk county, served as pallbearer at her funeral, as chairman and major speaker at a memorial service held in her honor the next week, and as member of a local committee to establish a permanent memorial for her.¹⁵ Two years after Crandall's death, Fletcher published *A New Scientific and Philosophical Treatise Upon the Origin, Development and Destiny of Man*,¹⁶ a book-length statement of spiritualist cosmology of remarkable coherence and style in spite of its title. Fletcher's publishers were the Vincent brothers of radical Winfield *Non-Conformist* notoriety, recently moved to Indianapolis. The fourth figure was George C. Armstrong, editor of the *Moline Republican*, the only newspaper in the area to publish the full text of the sermon preached at Crandall's lavish funeral. Armstrong was a promoter of Fletcher's book and he was also in frequent contact with Williams. He vigorously defended spiritualism in his newspaper columns, and made no secret of his beliefs.¹⁷

Of Prudence Crandall as a reforming spiritualist specifically, we can say that though Elk county and Elk Falls, her home town, seem generally to have been proud of their most famous citizen, they also held her at arm's length; her local acceptance was less than total. The other residents were certainly pleased to host luminaries such as the temperance and woman's rights lecturer Helen Gougar, who came to visit Crandall in early 1887, and Belva Lockwood, of even greater fame as a recent candidate for President, who there is reason to believe was in Elk Falls the previous Christmas.¹⁸ Yet because of her spiritualism,

13. Howard *Courant*, May 31, 1883; *Moline Republican*, December 7, 1894.

14. A. C. Williams, *The Warning Cry, or the Downfall of the Republic* (Elk Falls, 1892).

15. *Elk Falls Ledger*, October 26, 1888; Howard *Courant*, January 31, February 14, 1890; *Moline Republican*, January 30, 1890.

16. Published in Indianapolis, 1891. The book was not available for sale until the late winter of 1892.

17. *Moline Republican*, February 7, 1890, February 12, October 7, 1892, January 22, July 7, 21, August 11, 1893, December 7, 1894, May 3, June 21, September 6, 1895.

18. Howard *Courant*, December 24, 31, 1886; *Winfield Tribune*, March 19, 1887.

12. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1879, December 30, 1880, January 20, March 10, 1881, February 2, September 28, December 14, 1882, February 22, October 17, 1884; Prudence Crandall Philleo to Josephine Crandall, July 25, 1880, in David O. White, comp., "Prudence Crandall Philleo: Letters From Kansas," copies in Kansas State Historical Society. For the Little Caney colony of Negro immigrants in Chautauqua county, in which Prudence Crandall was interested, see Historic Sites Survey, Kansas State Historical Society, *Historic Preservation in Kansas. Black Historic Sites: A Beginning Point* (Topeka, 1977), pp. 21-22.



Prudence Crandall's home in Elk Falls was a meeting place for her "ethical conferences" and for the Elk Falls WCTU chapter. Her concerns in those years continued to be woman's rights, temperance, and spiritualism. In her battle against alcohol she apparently was not concerned over the inconsistency between the coercion of prohibition and the individualistic permissiveness of spiritualism. Photograph courtesy the Wichita Eagle.

Crandall was not allowed to speak in the churches of the town, and her funeral sermon was preached by Rev. C. L. McKesson, a Congregationalist minister without a charge who lived in her house at Elk Falls and who was later to abandon the pulpit in favor of Alliance-Populist politics.¹⁹

In her career as an Elk county activist, Crandall was most effective as an oral persuader. She published rather little save for a good bit of hastily composed verse printed in area newspapers, either over her own name or the pseudonym "Hope." Mostly she lectured, at country school houses, the Elk Falls town hall, or occasionally in neighboring towns. She also wrote letters to newspapers, or conducted "ethical conferences" at her home, and her types of concern in the 1880's were the same, save antislavery, as had exercised most reformers since before the Civil War: woman's rights and temperance—and spiritualism.

On woman's rights Crandall could occasionally be pungent. At Winfield in early December, 1885, she was treated as a celebrity when she spoke to the local Woman's Suffrage Association on the iniquity suffered by women as a result of the "usurpation of taxation with-

out representation in the government."²⁰ A little over a year later, on the occasion of the passage of Kansas' women's municipal suffrage law in 1887, she wrote to a local newspaper that she was first repelled at the partial nature of the measure and the inequality that remained, for the law applied only to married women who lived in towns. Yet she concluded that "It is the duty of women to be thankful for a little good and to pray earnestly for full voting capacity for all women on terms of equality." Just how thankful Kansas women ought to be, she then indicated. Reminding readers of the custom on important state occasions in the past of performing some great symbolic, celebratory act, "such as releasing Barabbas at the crucifixion of Christ," perhaps it would be appropriate for Kansas' new female voters "to cast their first vote in a plain calico dress, and then to wait patiently further demonstrations till all tax-paying women, widows, and hard-working farmers wives, can with them celebrate their own emancipation. . . ." ²¹ Crandall's stand on woman's suffrage probably had something to do with Elk Falls being one of the first towns in Kansas to elect a full slate of female municipal officers,

19. *Moline Republican*, February 7, 1890; *Howard Courant*, May 1, 1891, March 11, 1892.

20. *Ibid.*, December 4, 1885.

21. *Ibid.*, March 11, 1887.

including mayor, council, and police judge, in April, 1889, but none of the victorious candidates seem to have been close associates of hers.²²

One woman who *was* a close associate was Mrs. Maggie (M. E.) Nichols, who had been the Greenback county superintendent of schools in 1878-1880, and who, though married, habitually used the initials of her given name in public communications. Though she didn't share Prudence Crandall's spiritualism, she probably was her closest woman friend, and together they did battle against alcohol, with apparently rather wide public support. In the summer of 1887 and later they shared platforms in behalf of the Elk Falls branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.²³ Crandall had previously been involved in "temperance festivals" held for Elk Falls school children, of which the culmination was a ritual snack of an apple or a cracker and a draught of cold water.²⁴ But by 1887 the lecture topic was "Prohibition" rather than "Temperance;" Crandall's home was the regular meeting place of the Elk Falls WCTU chapter; and she seems not to have been concerned over the inconsistency between the coerciveness of prohibition and the individualistic permissiveness of spiritualism, though other spiritualists certainly were. Fellow spiritualist and journalist James Vincent, Sr., for instance, a little later called the activity of the WCTU a "direct thrust at liberty."²⁵ In fact, of course, prohibition was already a relatively settled political issue in Kansas in the 1880's; the main problem now was enforcement of the state's prohibitory law.

The direct relationship of Crandall's activities in behalf of woman's rights and prohibition, and spiritualism, seems never to have been explicated; with few exceptions during her lifetime it seems to have been her non-spiritualist associates with whom she labored for those causes.²⁶ In Elk county, spiritualism

seems to have been perceived as a separate and somewhat less than reputable concern of hers. Indeed the measure of the disreputability might be reflected in several references to community ostracism that were made at the time of her death; one correspondent, perhaps Fletcher, opined that Crandall had "brought upon herself here about as much persecution for her religious beliefs as she did in Canterbury for her action in regard to teaching the colored people."²⁷ That position is of course extreme; she was, after all, old and venerable, nonthreatening and certainly perceived as deserving some regard, but it is certain that Crandall had felt isolated as a spiritualist in Elk Falls. In 1882 she wrote Williams that she felt "like a lone one," and to a New England visitor four years later she confessed "there are but one or two persons in the place that I can converse with profitably for any length of time."²⁸

Yet soon after her arrival she began submitting poems to local newspapers, and they *are* interesting for their spiritualist themes of the unity and divinity of all nature, the progress of the soul toward infinite joy when rightly directed, and of hope for the dying.²⁹ One of her later verses, dedicated to the fiancée of a young man lately killed in an accident, promised, with the certainty of absolute conviction:

When your mission is ended
And life's work is o'er,
You'll meet that dear loved one
"On that ever green shore."³⁰

MORE OVERT spiritualist activity seems to have come only after the arrival of Williams in the Crandall household. Williams's spiritualism was completely public from the outset; soon after he arrived in Elk county he began selling *Heaven and Hell*, a pamphlet of his authorship treating of "wonderful revelations and reasons pertaining to the proof of universal salvation and progression."³¹ Prudence Crandall began lecturing on

22. *Ibid.*, April 5, 1889. See, also, "Women in Office," *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 12 (1911-1912), p. 399.

23. *Howard Courant*, April 29, May 13, June 10, July 1, 1887, February 17, June 1, 1888. After Prudence Crandall's death, Maggie Nichols became an Alliance lecturer and was an organizer of Elk Falls' first woman's club.—*Ibid.*, February 16, 1891, September 23, 1892.

24. *Ibid.*, January 18, 1884, May 7, 1886.

25. *Christina*, Tabor, Iowa, February 6, 1890.

26. One exception was T. P. Fletcher, who addressed a district WCTU convention in August, 1887.—*Elk Falls Telephone*, September 3, 1887.

27. *Howard Courant*, January 29, February 14, 1890; *Moline Republican*, February 7, 1890. The quotation is from *Kansas City Journal*, January 29, 1890.

28. Prudence Crandall Philileo to Williams, October 1, 1882, quoted in *Moline Republican*, December 7, 1894; Thayer, *Pedal and Path*, p. 213.

29. *Elk Falls Signal*, December 3, 31, 1880, January 7, 1881; *Elk Falls Ledger*, October 5, 1888.

30. *Howard Courant*, December 2, 1887.

31. *Ibid.*, May 31, June 14, 21, 1883. No surviving copy of *Heaven and Hell* has been found.

spiritualism at least as early as May, 1884, and began holding Sunday meetings at home the following fall. These meetings seem not to have been seances, but instead gatherings "in which a sermon is read and discussed by the audience in a conference manner."³² Near neighbors were among those attracted to these meetings and some were converted; by the spring of 1887 a local dairyman lectured at Crandall's house on the subject "Spiritualism and Christianity Identical."³³ After being indemnified by the state of Connecticut, Crandall apparently acquired some greater measure of local forgiveness for her queer beliefs. Her birthday was celebrated in 1887 by a public debate on the heretical proposition "Resolved, that in the universe of God there is no positive principle of evil." Arguing the affirmative was the Elk Falls attorney F. A. Stoddard, and the negative was taken by county-seat lawyer and political warhorse Reuben H. Nichols.³⁴

Only once did Prudence Crandall take leave of her custom of gentle persuasion when it came to spiritualism. A Campbellite minister elsewhere in the county had preached in a meeting that all who were not literal believers in the teachings and divine origin of the Bible were doomed. Since spiritualists were obviously implicitly included in these ranks, Crandall came forth with some of her strongest public language in Kansas. She objected to such veneration of a volume which "sanctions war, slavery and polygamy [*sic*] . . ." and went further to make the clearest statement of her spiritualist belief that has been found.

Who are the millions of Spiritualists [she wrote] . . . but those who deny that the God of nature was ever born of a woman and that Jesus of Nazareth with all his loving words and mighty deeds never performed an original act and that souls to be happy must be in harmony with the eternal laws of the divine spirit to whom we all present our petitions and who has made man after his own image a spirit also, and that we while in the physical body may and often do hold communion with our dear friends who have . . . passed the change we call death.

For a pastor to consign such people to hell, where souls not only burned but where they

forever despaired of God's love, was "an eternal damnation, than which it never entered the human mind to conceive anything more humanly atrocious. It is the acme of diabolical malice which you say is displayed by the Creator, whom we are asked at the same time to consider a being of boundless love and mercy."³⁵

It seems clear that Crandall's situation in Elk Falls was an ambiguous one. She was very old, and her reform activities were in behalf of old-fashioned issues. Those causes were respectable and noncontroversial in Kansas in the 1880's, and widely supported in Elk county. Though in due course she consorted with people who were, or would be identified, as radicals, she lost no status from these activities. And as indicated, in the case of prohibition, she labored in behalf of a program somewhat in contradiction with the classic spiritualist tradition. Her spiritualism was largely a separate concern, not specifically identified with the rest of her public life. That spiritualism, which was perceived basically as one of a number of comparably credible and new socio-religious persuasions in the 1850's, was thought of quite differently 40 years later, seems obvious in the ambivalent community attitude toward Crandall. Though R. Laurence Moore says it encompassed "what seems in retrospect to have been the most liberal, progressive and liberating intellectual currents" of the 1850's, by the 1890's spiritualism was coming to be regarded as a positively deviant belief system, and though not necessarily a source of community harassment, certainly a cause of social exclusion.³⁶

IT IS PERHAPS in the case of Abraham C. Williams that we can even better account for the diminishing respectability of spiritualism. From the time of his appearance in Elk Falls until his departure, he seems to have been on the fringe of society. Unlike Prudence Crandall, he brought no favorable previous reputation to Elk county with him. He and Crandall probably made contact through the *Banner of Light*, a spiritualist periodical they both read. A bachelor of Indiana birth, Williams came to Kansas from Iowa, and in age

32. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1884. The quotation is from *ibid.*, October 17, 1884. No record has been found of seances or of inspired speaking at Crandall's home, but local tradition maintains that such things happened.—Interviews with Mrs. Orva Lyons, Elk Falls, July 19, 1971, June 30, 1978. Prudence Crandall seems never to have claimed to be a medium, but Williams did, and he may have presided over such meetings.

33. Howard *Courant*, May 6, 1887.

34. *Ibid.*, September 2, 1887; Elk Falls *Telephone*, September 3, 1887.

35. Prudence Crandall Philileo to Reverend Gibson of Grenola, in Howard *Courant*, November 18, 1887.

36. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, p. 36.

was about 30 when he arrived. At various times he listed his occupation as "farmer," "medium," and "doctor," and he purported for awhile also to be "observer to the U. S. Signal Service" and collector of weather data for the community.³⁷ Except for the *Heaven and Hell* episode, he remained very much in Prudence Crandall's shadow during her lifetime, managing her farm a mile west of town. George Thayer, who visited Crandall in 1886, described Williams as "a man of 35, with brown hair and mustache, large blue eyes, and a most sympathetic, almost affectionate manner."³⁸ Apparently he was referred to in the neighborhood as "Sweet" Williams.³⁹ When her annuity from Connecticut enabled Prudence Crandall to move into more comfortable quarters in town in 1886, she deeded her farm over to Williams, and on the indenture for this transaction is the only legal reference to him as her adopted son that has been found.⁴⁰ Williams remained on the farm for nine more years, finally selling it in 1895 and apparently living in Elk Falls himself for a brief time before moving to Arkansas.⁴¹

There seems no doubt that Williams was a comfort to Prudence Crandall in her advanced age, and that he meant a great deal to her personally. Yet he was nowhere mentioned in published accounts of her death, nor does he seem to have been prominently involved in her funeral or memorial service. Indeed, some evidence suggests him to have been, in a rather bootless way, a character of the sort with which Herman Melville once stocked a fictional Mississippi riverboat.⁴² A few pamphlets and leaflets written and distributed by him after Crandall's death still survive. One of these, *The Warning Cry, or the Downfall of the Republic*, predicted in 1892 the imminent end of the existing American system.⁴³ It represents Wil-

liams's only surviving public comment on current affairs. Wretchedly written, it foretold general death and bloodshed, "commencing in the cities and spreading to the rural districts," and consisting of "More frequent robberies—incendiarism—threatenings of the rich—strikes—mobs—tramps—train wrecking—murder in general—secret anarchist meetings—&c." Following this, "once a desire for order comes," was to be "a co-operative government established in which there will be no more war." Williams explained the origin of this prophecy as "by direct influx—some 13 years ago." On the back of *The Warning Cry* Williams advertised for sale not only that pamphlet ("five cents per copy—or cheaper by the quantity"), but his other pamphlet *Heaven and Hell*, T. P. Fletcher's recently published book, a used stereopticon with over 100 views, plus the farm that had been the gift of Prudence Crandall.

In *Continued Reciprocal or Perpetual Motion*, Williams announced that the principle of perpetual motion had been spiritually revealed to him. "Of course there's millions in it," he continued, "and we are willing to share and to get means and assistance to help work it out. . . ." He would establish a sort of joint stock company, selling the secret to all comers for one dollar, the price he also advertised on the same circular for prophetic readings.⁴⁴

It may be too easy to write Williams off as simply a sponger and a charlatan, for there was also something pathetically earnest about him, not only in such things as his collection of weather data "for the U. S. Signal Service," but in his undertaking, near the end of his stay in the county, to educate his neighbors in a series of newspaper articles on the germ theory of disease. The culmination of this effort came with his purchase of the stock of drugs owned by a recently deceased physician, whereupon he set himself up in the practice of medicine in Elk Falls.⁴⁵ "Dr. Williams is reputed to be one of the best posted microbian scholars in Kansas," wrote Armstrong of the *Moline Republican* with the straightest of faces.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, in Williams can be seen an example of spiritu-

37. *Moline Republican*, December 7, 1894; the manuscript Kansas State Census for Elk Falls township, Elk county, lists Williams as 30 years of age in 1885 and 46 in 1895, as a farmer the earlier year and a doctor the later. In W. D. Burns, comp., *First Annual Directory of Elk County* (Howard, 1888), p. 45, he is listed as a medium. *Elk Falls Ledger*, July 20-November 2, 1888, contains Williams's weather observations.

38. Thayer, *Pedal and Path*, p. 210.

39. Interview with George Kelsey, Elk Falls, June 30, 1978.

40. Howard *Courant*, May 21, 1886; Prudence Crandall Phillee to A. C. Williams, indenture and deed filed July 9, 1888, Elk county Register of Deeds Book "Y" (Range 11 East), p. 267.

41. *Moline Republican*, June 21, September 6, 1895; A. C. Williams to A. W. Finley, deed filed July 31, 1895, Elk county Register of Deeds Book 1 (Range 11 East), p. 172.

42. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man* (New York, 1857).

43. See footnote 14, above.

44. A. C. Williams, *Continued Reciprocal or Perpetual Motion* (Elk Falls, n.d.).

45. *Moline Republican*, May 3, 17, 31, June 21, July 12, August 2, September 6, 1895. Williams also collected animal curiosities and publicly displayed them.—Howard *Citizen*, September 21, 1894; *Moline Republican*, September 27, 1895.

46. *Ibid.*, May 3, 1895.

THE WARNING CRY I

—OR—

THE DOWNFALL OF THE REPUBLIC.

—BY—

"THE PROPHETIC MEDIUM"



X — * DR. A. C. WILLIAMS, * — X

ELK FALLS, KANSAS.

1892.

Abraham C. Williams, Prudence Crandall's "adopted son," came to live with her in late 1882 or early 1883. Known in the neighborhood as "Sweet" Williams, he was no doubt a comfort to Crandall in her advanced age. A few pamphlets written and distributed by him after her death still survive. One of these, *The Warning Cry, or the Downfall of the Republic*, predicted in 1892 the imminent end of the existing American system.

alist individualism at its worst, and spiritualism's reputation suffered from the association of such marginal characters as he.

ON THE OTHER hand, Thomas Paritt Fletcher of Elk Falls, probably one of the one or two persons in the place with whom Prudence Crandall could converse with profit, was the very soul of probity. A fellow New Englander, he had been a prominent merchant, farmer, and stockman in Elk Falls since very close to its founding. He was a Mason, a political power not only in the township but in the county also, sometime mayor of Elk Falls and candidate for the state legislature, and inevitable supporter of community enterprises of a socially uplifting sort.⁴⁷ He flirted briefly with an Alliance-type organization which blamed low grain and livestock prices on "trusts and combinations," but only prior to the extreme politicization of Kansas farm organizations.⁴⁸ Politically he was a straight Republican, who campaigned for representative in 1894 on the basis of his loyalty to party and his success in business.⁴⁹ He supported prohibition, and because he was known to favor woman's suffrage, he was said to have won the unanimous vote of 30 newly enfranchised Elk Falls matrons in his successful mayoral campaign in 1887.⁵⁰ Almost 30 years younger than Prudence Crandall, he was of a generation that matured shortly before the Civil War. How he became a spiritualist is not known. His presence is documented at none of Crandall's public meetings, though he claimed, at her memorial service, to have known her 10 years. His undoubted position of community leadership may well have been to her benefit, and probably somewhat mitigated the negative local perception of spiritualism. The earliest clear indication of his affiliation with the spiritualist persuasion is the publication of his book, *Origin, Development and Destiny of Man*, two

years after Prudence Crandall's death.⁵¹ Later he publicly lectured on spiritualism, as far afield as Wisconsin, and he was one of the scheduled speakers at a spiritualist camp meeting in Greenwood county in the summer of 1895.⁵² These events are important benchmarks in the upsurge in spiritualist activity in Elk county in the early 1890's.

An obvious work of faith, Fletcher's book also shows considerable consultation of a wide range of sources, especially in view of the intellectual isolation of a community still only 20 years removed from the frontier stage. Fletcher never claimed to have written under inspiration. He drew from encyclopedias, works on astronomy, a number of obvious spiritualist titles, reports of the English Society for Psychic Research, plus a series of articles on psychic phenomena that had recently appeared in the *Arena*. Interspersed in the text at appropriate points are verses, whose informal rhyme and meter suggest some of the creations of Prudence Crandall. Among spiritualist publications at least, Fletcher's work seems chiefly remarkable for the extent to which it takes the Darwinian hypothesis into account, and for what seems to be an emphatic and politically significant celebration of spiritualist individualism.⁵³

Fletcher made use of Darwinian terminology but undertook to refute some of the popularized Darwinian arguments. He posited the existence of a "Central Spirit Unit" which was the source of creation, and from which God evolves. "The strongest forms," he wrote, "which mean the atoms that have in them the most spirit and force, are drawn back to the Central Spirit Unit, and the weaker atoms are rejected and sent to gather other force and spirit."⁵⁴ "Spirit" was a term Fletcher used to denote immanent intelligence or "mind," and to take account of the pervasiveness of "Spirit"

47. For information on Fletcher, see A. T. Andreas and W. G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883), p. 1180, in the sketch of his son-in-law and business partner, C. W. Rambo; *Ottawa Herald*, September 11, 1911; *Elk Falls Telephone*, September 10, 1887. For an unfriendly assessment of Fletcher's political influence (and of Fletcher), see *Winfield American Non-Conformist*, October 23, 1890.

48. *Howard Courant*, January 10, 1890.

49. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1894; *Moline Republican*, August 10, 24, 1894.

50. *Howard Courant*, April 8, 1887; *Elk Falls Telephone*, September 3, 1887.

51. The book's publication date is 1891, but it first appeared in the advertised list of Vincent brothers publications the following spring.—See *Indianapolis Non-Conformist*, March 24, 1892.

52. *Moline Republican*, October 7, 1892, January 13-27, 1893; *Howard Courant*, January 20, 1893; "Spiritual Camp Meeting! Derry, Greenwood County, Kas., To Be Held From June 30 to July 15, 1895," handbill in spiritualism file, library, Kansas State Historical Society.

53. For local reactions to Fletcher's book, see *Moline Republican*, February 12, 1892; *Howard Courant*, March 18, 1892.

54. Thos. P. Fletcher, *A New Scientific and Philosophical Treatise Upon the Origin, Development and Destiny of Man* (Indianapolis, H. & L. Vincent, 1891), pp. 22-24.

was necessary to bring the Darwinian hypothesis to completion.

The laws of evolution known as "Natural adaptation," "Struggle for existence," and "Natural selection," are only names for the way in which spirit has acted, and that this spirit is found . . . in every living organism. We claim that it is not possible for these laws to precede mind or to produce mind. We maintain that there is mind in every living organism, and that it is the mind or spirit in the organism which produces the phenomenon known as "natural adaptation," "struggle for existence," and "natural selection."⁵⁵

In other words, as a friendly critic observed, Fletcher professed to have provided the missing link!⁵⁶

Elsewhere in the volume Fletcher argued that all events are permanently recorded in the "Heavenly Ether." And in conformity with spiritualist writers before him, he reaffirmed humanity to be the crowning work of the "Eternal Spirit." Man was a being sent forth "upon a career of progression which has no end," capable of unlimited development because of his gift of everlasting life.⁵⁷ Jesus Christ was thus left by Fletcher with a status no greater than that of other humans, aside from an unusually enhanced spiritual sensitivity; "He was a good man and, as a result, he was surrounded by a band of noble spirits. He was able to receive and impart that which he received from them."⁵⁸ But to reduce Jesus in this way was also to negate his power as a redeemer.

Remember that Jesus has no power to forgive sin; that you must face your own record; that your record, once made, must forever stand; that there is no power in existence that can obliterate any part of it. This should be a great incentive for you to make your lives pure and noble. . . .⁵⁹

Likewise the fallibility of the Bible was asserted, for it was written by less inspired men in less enlightened times, "men who were more liable to err than are the inspired men of the present time," and the Holy Writ was not thought to have been improved by subsequent corrections and additions.⁶⁰

So what was left for man, asked Fletcher, if the Bible were not a faultless guide to conduct, nor Christ a guarantor of salvation, nor God a

divine personality? And what must man do to be saved? He answered:

We have left you all there is that is good. We have left you this mighty universe, which is filled with the good, the true and the noble. We have left you surrounded by infinite goodness, infinite beneficence, infinite sympathy, infinite love, infinite wisdom, and infinite power. . . .

All wisdom is left, all truth is left, all goodness is left, all that is worth keeping is left. . . .

We have no longer a Savior on whom we can throw our sins. According to our doctrine, every man must stand on his own merits. But if we take away that one upon whom you have been in the habit of leaning, we give you the power to stand alone, and it is always better to stand alone than it is to lean upon any one.⁶¹

Somewhat ironically, it was the Vincent brothers of the Populist *Non-Conformist* who published this complacent spiritualist paean to rugged individualism. Their father James Vincent, Sr., an "ultra-radical Greenback-Labor editor, and active advocate of the Knights of Labor,"⁶² was so committed to spiritualism as to have published a pamphlet on immortality, of which the coauthor was the spirit of his deceased wife; and in 1889-1891, again in concert with his departed spouse, he edited a radical bimonthly paper at Tabor, Iowa, devoted to sexual reform within marriage.⁶³ The mid-century conjunction of spiritualism with other reform causes is therefore visible in the case of the elder Vincent, and perhaps it was through his influence that Fletcher's book was accepted for publication. But the younger Vincents seem not to have shared their father's enthusiasm; spiritualism was seldom mentioned in their columns; and they gave Fletcher's book none of the extensive promotion that the strictly political titles on their publications list received.⁶⁴ Considering Fletcher's arguments, which were in no way congenial to the radical new sorts of collective political and social organization that the Vincents were advocating, that should be no surprise. For Fletcher's emphasis on the essentially benign nature of the universe and the inevitability of the moral improvement of the human soul was absolutely incompatible with the reforming urgency that the younger Vin-

55. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

56. *Moline Republican*, January 27, 1893.

57. Fletcher, *Origin, Development and Destiny of Man*, pp. 98-105, 162-187.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 326-328.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-336.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 348-351.

62. Malin, *A Concern About Humanity*, p. 155.

63. Mary S. and James Vincent, Sr., *The Immortality of the Soul* (Winfield, 1888); *Christna*, September 5, 1889-August 13, 1891. *Christna* eventually was drawn almost totally into a position of Alliance-Populist advocacy.

64. *Winfield American Non-Conformist*, May 22, 29, 1890; *Indianapolis American Non-Conformist*, January 14, March 24-June 23, 1892.

cents constantly proclaimed. Nor could his insistence that "it is always better to stand alone" make sense to them as they contemplated what they saw as a growing menace of capitalistic control of men's destinies. The Vincent brothers' world was a dangerous one where farmers and laborers were losing their independence to uncontrollable and vicious new economic forces.

A PUBLISHER much more sympathetic to Fletcher's spiritualist beliefs and pronouncements was George C. Armstrong of the *Moline Republican*. As we shall see, Armstrong was able further to amplify ideas of the sort that Fletcher suggested. He came to Moline from Illinois in the mid-1880's and took over full management of the *Republican* in 1889, already a committed spiritualist. A vigorous, articulate writer, Armstrong was a good example of a now-extinct breed, the aggressive, well-informed and reasonably literate small-town journalist of the 19th-century Middle Border.⁶⁵ At Moline, where, as a bemused neighboring editor wrote, "all the toney people are spiritualists,"⁶⁶ there seems to have been a more numerous body of spiritualist sympathizers than elsewhere in Elk county, and generally a broad tolerance existed for Armstrong's own predilections in that direction. In politics Armstrong was, like Fletcher, an outspoken Republican, though with inclination in favor of bimetalism.

With no formal religious ties, Armstrong relished playing the role of village infidel, though he valued the churches as necessary agencies of ethical instruction and right thinking. "Away from the influence of churches, people drift away from the right," he once wrote, "and the young especially become very reckless and rude."⁶⁷ For a church to presume a broader function of social control was too much, however. In a winter-long controversy with a local Methodist preacher, Armstrong disputed a church's public role in the community in opposition to dancing, and in favor of the enforcement of the prohibitory law. In the latter case Armstrong revealed his own identification with the usual noncoercive spiritualist position, by writing that "the real prohibi-

tion worker is he who labors to create a sentiment, in the community, favorable to obeying the law. . . . Men must be educated to believe in the law and obey it."⁶⁸

Armstrong opened his newspaper to free thought of all sorts, some of it rather dubious. One contributor was A. C. Williams, already mentioned. Another undertook, in the spring of 1892, to amplify T. P. Fletcher's cosmology, asserting the spiritualist over the materialist position. That series halted rather suddenly after a reader, a college graduate who had studied physics, objected to such excessive assumptions by the writer as the tendency of light's speed to accelerate with distance, or the material nature of light, which made it susceptible to gravitation.⁶⁹ The same author later undertook to demonstrate the predictability of weather phenomena; meteorology, he insisted, could be developed into an exact science because the occurrence of magnetic disturbances in the atmosphere could be calculated in advance.⁷⁰

Spiritualist advocacy and information permeated Armstrong's columns. Moline got more than its share of traveling spiritualist lecturers; they all were duly noted and sympathetically covered, except the obviously fraudulent, with whom Armstrong had no patience.⁷¹ Spiritualist excesses seem to have embarrassed him; for two consecutive summers, spiritualist camp meetings, primarily gatherings of mediums, clairvoyants, and trance-speakers, were held at Sailing's Grove, just across the Greenwood county line at Derry, and Armstrong hardly noticed them.⁷² But if spiritualism needed defending, Armstrong was ready. In the summer of 1893, Sol Miller, celebrated and venerated editor of the Troy *Kansas Chief*, slurred spiritualism, calling it among other things a species of insanity. Armstrong took Miller on, and in an editorial controversy of statewide interest, he declared the right of spiritualists and any other free-thinkers to dignified public treatment, and the freedom "to believe in whatever

68. *Ibid.*, December 28, 1894, January 25, February 15, 1895. The quotation is from the December 28 issue.

69. W. H. Morrow, "Practical Science Talks," *ibid.*, April 1-May 13, 1892.

70. *Ibid.*, September 20, 1895.

71. *Ibid.*, November 28, December 26, 1890, December 4, 1891, September 9, 1892, January 13-27, May 19, 1893, February 23, March 2, July 6, 1894.

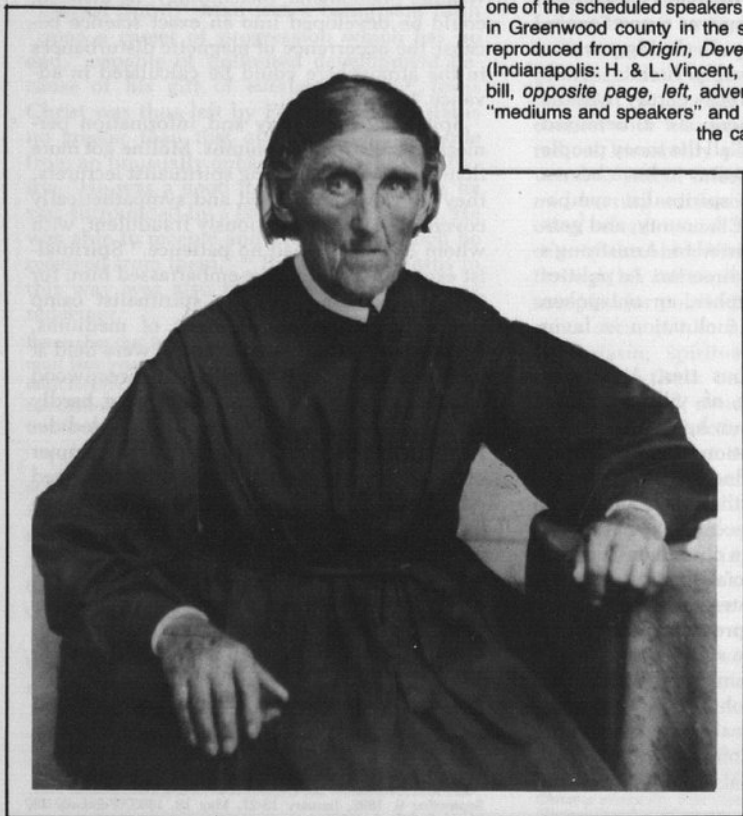
72. *Ibid.*, June 21, July 12, 1895. The *Howard Courant* gave the camp meetings wide publicity. See June 29, July 6, 20, August 3, 1894, June 14, 21, July 19, 26, 1895.

65. *Moline Republican*, January 21, 1898.

66. *Howard Courant*, August 9, 1895.

67. *Moline Republican*, December 14, 1894.

In her last years in Elk Falls, Prudence Crandall Philleo, *below*, was persuasive as a lecturer but published little except some verse printed in area newspapers. Although her fellow townspeople were proud of their most famous citizen, they did not totally accept the reforming spiritualist in their midst. Because of her spiritualism she was not allowed to speak in the town's churches, and her funeral sermon was preached by a Congregational minister without a charge who was later to abandon the pulpit in favor of Alliance-Populist politics. This photograph of Crandall was made in Howard, in November, 1882, when she was nearly 80 years old. It is reproduced here from a copy made by Leo's Studio, Mendota, Ill. Thomas P. Fletcher, *lower right, opposite page*, sometime mayor and community leader of Elk Falls, was a spiritualist who added respectability to the movement and was probably one of the few persons in the town with whom Crandall could converse with profit. His book, *Origin, Development and Destiny of Man*, was published in 1891. Later he lectured on spiritualism as far afield as Wisconsin, and was one of the scheduled speakers at a spiritualist camp meeting in Greenwood county in the summer of 1895. Photograph reproduced from *Origin, Development and Destiny of Man* (Indianapolis: H. & L. Vincent, Publishers, 1891). The handbill, *opposite page, left*, advertised the meeting, listing the "mediums and speakers" and giving directions for reaching the camp.



SPIRITUAL CAMP MEETING!

—AT—

DERRY, Greenwood County, KANSAS,
TO BE HELD FROM
JUNE 30 TO JULY 15, 1895.

MEDIUMS AND SPEAKERS.

FOR THE OCCASION.

SPEAKERS:—Rev. Moses Hull, Chicago; Dr. W. L. Richardson, Fame, Kansas; Rev. Mrs. L. A. MaBee, Topeka, Kansas; Rev. Mrs. Etta Seaman, Concordia, Kansas; T. P. Fletcher, Pawnee, Oklahoma; Rev. Adam Downing, Gridley, Kansas; Judge S. M. T. r, Wichita, Kansas, and many other speakers will be on the grounds.

MEDIUMS:—Rev. O. L. Concanon, Kansas City, Missouri, Materializing; Mrs. E. M. Gilman, Houston, Texas, Materializing; Rev. Mrs. Eddela Concanon, the world renowned Platform Test medium, who gives the full name of the friends you think of as dead but who are only in a higher life; Dr. C. F. Figures, Nashville, Tennessee, the wonderful Independent Slate Writer; Mrs. M. R. Hutchison, Cherryvale, Kansas, test and magnetic healer; Dr. D. Eastman, Winfield, test and magnetic healer; Mrs. Mary Goodwin, Topeka, Clairvoyant and Clairaudient; Mrs. Reeves, Guthrie, Oklahoma, trance; E. M. Gilman, Houston, Texas, Physical; Matt Alderson, Mulhall, Oklahoma, trance and test; and many other good mediums will be on the grounds.

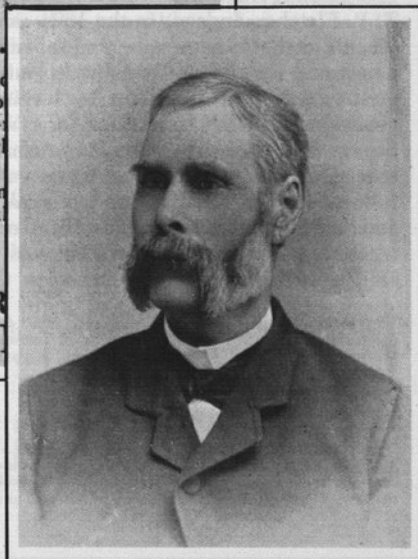
Good board can be had on the grounds.

Good stand with all kinds of refreshments.

Derry is situated on the St. Louis and San Francisco railroad east of Wichita, Kansas. The Camp will be in a natural grove of river, 4 miles south of Derry. Teams will meet all day trains— from station, 25 cents. Parties should start so as to arrive in day, bring their own bedding and camping outfit. Free pasture for provided. A limited number of tents to rent. Those wishing tent reserved by notifying the Secretary by mail. Those living in Ok to travel in parties of ten in order to secure reduced rates.

Camp address,

MISS MAUD CLINGER
Derry,



religion they wish without being insulted, maligned and traduced by every old fool who happens to get bilious and go on a tantrum." ⁷³

Frequently, however, the spiritualist sentiment was more covertly introduced into the *Republican*. "Still another preacher has been suspended for preaching heresy," Armstrong wrote in June, 1891. "This time it is Rev. Thompson, of Ontario, who says there is no material hell. If this thing continues much longer there will be quite an army of smart preachers outside the churches." ⁷⁴ Later he noted "The world did not come to an end last Tuesday as was contemplated by prophet J. S. Willis of St. Louis. . . . If folks could only realize that time had no beginning and therefore will have no ending, it would save a good lot of prophesying." ⁷⁵ In April, 1894, Armstrong took advantage of the *Emporia Republican's* discovery of scriptural opposition to woman's suffrage, to promote his own views of the Bible and the woman's rights movement. "The scriptures have been made the scapegoat for a wonderful lot of bad reasoning and mental imbecility," or worse, such as the enormity of Negro slavery. ". . . It is a great wonder there are not more disbelievers than there are." ⁷⁶ A month later he took up a position on revivalism and the recent rebirth of the soul of a disgraced congressman by writing "When people learn that sin must be atoned for, that purity of soul is a matter of growth, and not of sudden conversion, it will be better for all." ⁷⁷

Armstrong was as much a political activist as T. P. Fletcher. Indeed, in the 1894 campaign when Fletcher ran for state representative and Armstrong for clerk of the district court, Elk county was distinguished by having two avowed spiritualist candidates for public office on the Republican ticket. ⁷⁸ In Armstrong's case more clearly than any other can we see the influence of spiritualism on political belief, and the end product was a generalized negative reaction to the new reform demands of the 1890's. Nowhere is this better seen than in

what amounted to a biweekly newspaper column undertaken by Armstrong early in 1891, under the pseudonym of "The Owl." ⁷⁹

"The Owl's" career began in political observations, as the People's party began to be organized in Kansas and Elk county, but in early June the subject changed to spiritualism. The first two spiritualist columns were of unexceptional content, reaffirming traditional views of man as the finest representation of the totality of being, and as immortal. ⁸⁰ Two weeks later, however, Armstrong began to meditate on the progressive refinement of the human soul, in this world and the spirit world; and he reasserted and developed the spiritualist tenet that dominated the conclusion of Fletcher's book, that the individual is unconditionally captain of his own fate. "Happiness or misery depends upon works," he said. "The laying aside of the physical body makes no change of character or identity, therefore it becomes necessary for man to make his life here as he wishes it to be in the hereafter. . . ." Viewing the object of human life to be self-development and the unfolding of intelligence, Armstrong then declared:

The person who profits by experience gained upon any plane of existence, gathering up the lessons, studying them closely that he may incorporate their results into his life for further guidance, will be prepared to learn by discipline, to profit by experience, and to expand in knowledge upon other planes of life. . . . But the man who sits down quietly, ignoring the impulses and possibilities of his being, feeling that he can do but little, may as well not attempt to do anything, for he will find his powers going to waste. . . . ⁸¹

The next week, writing in a nonspiritualist mode, Armstrong gave the argument a secular political anchor. In a Fourth of July address at Moline, E. G. Dewey, a prominent Elk county Republican, had scored those hysterical Populists who said that reform must be won by bullets if not by ballots. Armstrong commented that only a few Populists used rhetoric so violent, but nonetheless, he deplored what he thought to be the destructiveness of Peoples' party doctrine, and also its tendency toward scapegoatism. "It cannot be otherwise than perfectly plain . . .," he said, "that the whole argument of the third party enthusiasts is an appeal to the baser passions of the people

73. *Moline Republican*, July 7, 21, August 11, 1893. The quotation is from the July 21 issue. See, also, *Howard Courant*, July 21, 28, August 11, 1893.

74. *Moline Republican*, June 19, 1891.

75. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1894.

76. *Ibid.*, April 27, 1894.

77. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1894.

78. *Howard Courant*, July 13, 1894. Armstrong, also like Fletcher, campaigned actively for woman's suffrage in the 1894 state constitutional referendum.—*Ibid.*, June 15, 1894; *Moline Republican*, March 16, 1894.

79. The style of "The Owl" is clearly Armstrong's.

80. *Moline Republican*, June 5, 19, 1891.

81. *Ibid.*, July 3, 1891.

and calculated to arouse the meaner instincts in men. The man who has, from one cause or another, been unable to accumulate a fortune is educated to believe that the fault is not within himself but with some other person, or persons, who have an interest in keeping him down. . . ."⁸²

As the summer progressed, Armstrong, as "the Owl," continued to develop an interpretation of Populists as ineffectual or exploitive ne'er-do-wells, who had given up on self-help and were capitalizing on negativism and distrust. In "A Chapter on Chumps," appearing on July 24, Armstrong eulogized the self-made man again. "In this country the men who succeed are the men who work. Those who do not work do not win the prizes. Our successful men are tireless toilers. The failures are generally the drones. They turn out to be 'reformers' and go about the country organizing secret political societies. Thus the 'oppressed farmer' is made to do penance to office seeking dead beats."⁸³ And late in August, "the Owl" attacked the county Populist platform as full of "demands, declarations and denouncements. . . . To demand and denounce is the especial forte of the People's party. It requires neither brains nor statesmanship to demand or denounce. Anybody can do it. The men who do the most of it are generally those fellows who are least capable of doing any good themselves. They can tear down but they don't possess the wisdom to build up again."⁸⁴

Unfortunately for him, and perhaps for the cause of spiritualism, Armstrong could not find within himself, nor in the doctrine that informed him, sufficient resources to counter Populist arguments with much more than the foregoing reactionary assertions. Of course, as a partisan editor, he supported Republican platforms, but in promoting Fletcher's legislative campaign, the most important thing Armstrong could say about the candidate was that he had proven his worth by his works.⁸⁵ In the summer of 1895, four years after "the Owl" had vacated his aerie, Armstrong could come up with no better personal political agenda than "Protection, reciprocity and bi-metallism . . . [as] the holy trinity that will bring

prosperity to all the people of this nation. . . ."⁸⁶ He thought the Democrats and their Populist auxiliaries would disappear after the 1896 election, and on the Republicans would then rest the responsibility for solving the questions that by mid-decade no one could deny were "now pressing upon us." But what the Republican solutions might be, aside from the tariff, reciprocity, and silver money, Armstrong had not much of a clue. "Every Republican should be an investigator, a thinker, a statesman," he prescribed. "He should get in touch with the people, learn what they want, and be with them."⁸⁷

SPIRITUALISM can be said to have disappeared as a visible belief system in Elk county after the mid-1890's, and some of the surface reasons are rather obvious: Prudence Crandall had been dead for five years and A. C. Williams left the area in 1895, for a farm in northwest Arkansas. But in terms of social acceptance they both had been rather marginal. It was spiritualists such as Fletcher and Armstrong who, because of their respected positions, had probably helped make spiritualism at least momentarily tolerable in Elk county. But Fletcher also left in 1895, for the new town of Pawnee in the Cherokee strip, very likely in part as a result of what turned out to be a humiliating and unsuccessful political campaign the year before. In that contest, C. L. McKesson, eulogist of Prudence Crandall and defender of her spiritualism at her funeral, was Fletcher's chief journalistic antagonist, as editor of the Populist Howard *Citizen*. Shortly before the election McKesson made an issue of Fletcher's spiritualism, declaring that Fletcher's speeches demonstrated "that he had not been living in the world for the past twenty or thirty years," dubbing him an infidel for maintaining that contemporary spiritualist inspirations were superior to Biblical ones, and calling him a liar for claiming, for political reasons, to be a Congregationalist.⁸⁸ Armstrong's tenure in the county lasted not much longer; he died suddenly at the age of 47 less than three years later.⁸⁹

82. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1891.

83. *Ibid.*, July 24, 1891.

84. *Ibid.*, August 28, 1891.

85. *Ibid.*, August 10, 1894.

86. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1895.

87. *Ibid.*, September 20, 1895.

88. Howard *Citizen*, October 12, 19, 26, November 2, 1894; Howard *Courant*, October 26, 1894.

89. Moline *Republican*, January 21, 1898.

But more important, of course, is the fact that no new local advocates of spiritualism came forward; as an ideology, spiritualism was simply losing force. Whatever the reasons of social insecurity that lay behind its brief outbreak in Elk county in the 1890's, it clearly couldn't last. Constantly opposed by the Christian clerical establishment, it was also already tainted, nationally and locally, by the fringe activities of associates such as Williams. And though important and profound insights on great topics might be expressed and proclaimed at any American crossroads in the 1840's, for T. P. Fletcher to be theorizing about the cosmos in Elk Falls, Kan., 40 years later, or for the Moline *Republican* to be the source of new and original thought about scientific problems, not only seemed presumptuous, it was coming to appear ludicrous. Knowledge was coming to be identified as the preserve of formally trained academics in America, as it always had been in Europe, and college graduates were available in the smallest communities to put down local scientific speculations that might seem spurious. Spiritualism, which originated in popular enthusiasms in the 1850's and continued for the rest of the century to be rather more a folk movement than an elite one among those truly committed to it, was peculiarly ill-equipped to be taken seriously by the learned. Of course psychic phenomena, the bases of all other spiritualist beliefs, were becoming interesting to properly credentialed seers such as William James as early as the 1890's, and academic investigation of them continues in several university departments of parapsychology in our own time. But parapsychology is a somewhat meager relic of the quite widespread

optimistic, and in many ways rather attractive reforming spiritualism of the 19th century.⁹⁰

Of that reforming spiritualism, R. Laurence Moore quite properly points out that "Its individualism and its dislike of collective action derived as they were from Jacksonian America, were outmoded strategies by the end of the 19th Century,"⁹¹ and this evaluation would certainly fit the case of Elk county. Yet it seems that one can go further still, in that particular case. Prudence Crandall died still a true believer in the hopeful order that 19th-century spiritualists promised, but Armstrong and Fletcher, much younger persons, were obliged to demonstrate that as spokesmen for spiritualism they not only had nothing new to say about the conditions of modernizing America in the 1890's, they vigorously opposed the reforming demands of others rising from these new conditions. Elk county was a modern community, tributary to the new world-wide price and market conditions, and as such it was vulnerable to corporate decisions made many miles away; individual self-reliance was no bulwark against policies made by the Santa Fe railroad or grain prices set at Liverpool. Indeed the Populists may not have provided the most accurate analyses of the new circumstances, but it is clear that in Elk county the spiritualists didn't either. Their doctrine could therefore not endure, as a rationale for mere political reaction.

90. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, pp. 133-243, gives a good survey of the development of systematic work in parapsychology. See, also, Robert H. Thouless, *From Anecdote to Experiment in Psychological Research* (London, 1972); and Nils O. Jacobson, *Life Without Death* (New York, 1973). Jacobson explains the difference between parapsychologists and spiritualists: "Parapsychologists seek knowledge and pose questions, while spiritualists have faith and give answers," in *ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

91. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, p. 100.