

# Bindelof Phenomena

This article describes séance phenomena – psychokinetic movements, levitation, communication via automatic writing and healing – experienced by a group of American teenage boys during sittings held weekly between 1929 and 1933. Details are drawn from [The Spirit Of Dr. Bindelof](#) (2006) by Rosemarie Pilkington, which contains chapters written by two of the group's founding members, Gilbert Roller and Larry Levin.

## First Sitzings

Gilbert Roller, the son of entertainers, experienced a tumultuous childhood full of quarrels and sudden relocations. He grew up with psychical phenomena: his mother had participated in séances and the family library contained books on psychical research. When he was about thirteen, apparent poltergeist activity occurred in the home, starting with hairpins and knobs being thrown, and extending to the destruction of a prized toy and messages written in crayon on the walls in five-foot high letters.

Roller noticed that such things happened more frequently and intensely when he was present. Intrigued, he and his friend Leonard Lauer, a mentally-gifted thirteen-year-old, began to hold mediumistic sittings based on techniques they'd read about in psychical research books and journals. On their second attempt they experienced [movements of the table](#), which were at first erratic and could then be made to happen on command. Each suspected trickery by the other, but these concerns disappeared when the table began gyrating around the room, and they were able to command it to levitate to shoulder height. The table also emitted noises, typically sharp percussive sounds as if someone was rapping on it.

They were now joined by a thirteen-year-old friend, Larry Levin. By 1933 the group had expanded to include Leo Kaiser, [Montague Ullman](#), Howard Frisch, George Kaiser (Leo's cousin), Tom Loeb and Horace Joseph. The sittings were held on Saturday evenings in Roller's bedroom. Roller writes:

These regular meetings and our constant striving to see 'what else' we could do had a dramatic effect on the development of the phenomena. We became dissatisfied with 'mere' levitations and raps as our inquiring minds sought answers to all sorts of questions through 'communication' with whatever 'guiding spirits' or energies we might be reaching.<sup>1</sup>

Roller cites a description of the table activity written by Ullman in 1933, while sessions were continuing.

In these experiments ... we used an ordinary bridge table, keeping contact with the table and with each other by means of our hands. The room is usually light enough to permit us to see what takes place. After one or two moments the

table would start to move and distinct knockings are heard, seemingly coming from beneath the table. One of the sitters utters commands (it is immaterial who does the talking as long as all the others are thinking along with him), and response is almost instantaneous. The table moves to the one whose name is mentioned.

Ullman goes on to describe how the group first got the table to respond by tilting in any direction they asked it to, and then to elevate to a height of two or more feet. He continues:

We experimented with one or two of us taking our hands away and eventually we were all able to remove our hands, one at a time, from the table and it remained suspended in mid-air for about two seconds before falling to the floor. Thus encouraged, we kept trying until we were able to get the table to rise up to our hands, which we held about two feet above it.

## Experiments with Images

The group were concerned to discover the nature of the 'force' they were seeing, and experimented to see if it would respond to questions, two raps for 'no' and one for 'yes', or by words, with letters of the alphabet being called out and a single rap indicating the correct one. A frequently heard sound was a drum-roll culminating in a single loud rap, which apparently served to call attention or to punctuate some particularly spectacular incident; the group came to regard this as the signature sound of the intelligence. All their attempts to reproduce it failed.

Roller states: 'Our restlessness and curiosity led us to adopt a pattern of attempting to develop each type of phenomenon to its highest pitch and then to turn to another phase of investigation.'<sup>2</sup>

At an early stage they experimented with [paranormal photography](#), obtaining distinct photographic images of objects by laying them on the outside of light-proof metal containers within which were emulsion-covered glass plates. A rap would indicate when the plate was ready to develop. Besides the anomaly of images appearing without direct exposure, these proved to be positives rather than negatives, 'as though some radiation had penetrated from above the mental holders casting a "shadow" of the object onto the plate.'<sup>3</sup>

The group then experimented with 'thought pictures' by having one member hold the plate to his head while the whole group visualized an object. This produced some near-misses; for instance, visualising a milk bottle created the image of an iodine bottle, while thoughts of a page from a book, selected by Roller's mother and seen only by her, produced a page of print, although with illegible text. Other efforts were less successful. An attempt to produce an image of one member's girlfriend, whom only he had seen, produced the image of a Native American amulet that belonged to Roller, possibly because Roller's thoughts had wandered to Native Americans during the session.

## Written Communications

Having ascertained by means of raps that the 'force' could write messages, the youths placed pencil and paper on the table and sat as usual. After some false starts, the pencil began racing across the paper at a furious speed, then the paper crumpled into a ball. When they opened it they found a long message in block capitals, starting with this passage:

THE FORCE IS GENERATED BY THE COMBINED EFFORTS OF THE SITTERS OPERATING IN UNISON. THE PRODUCTION OF THIS FORCE BY THE SITTERS SETS INTO ACTION THE OTHERWISE DORMANT ENERGY PRESENT IN THE SURROUNDING ATMOSPHERE.[4](#)

The invisible writer went on to give instructions for inducing 'materialization', to satisfy their curiosity about reports of 'ectoplasmic' limbs produced by certain mediums since the nineteenth century. Soon they felt an unseen hand tug at their clothes and lightly pull their hair; to preclude the possibility of trickery by any member of the group, they formed a human chain by holding hands and touching feet. Roller, declaring his intention to grab the hand when it touched him, received a sharp slap across the face.

The writer told them it had an identity:

IN THE LOWER FORMS OF PHENOMENA SUCH AS TABLE MOVEMENTS, NO ONE IDENTITY EXISTS, BUT MERELY AN EXERTION OF FORCE BROUGHT INTO PLAY BY THE SITTERS. IN THE HIGHER MANIFESTATIONS SUCH AS YOU ARE OBTAINING THE FORCE MOULDS ITSELF INTO AN IDENTITY WITH DEFINITE INTELLIGENCE.[5](#)

During a sitting in September 1933, the entity ordered the group not to question its status as an independent intelligence. It also claimed to be able to cure certain diseases.

About this time, [psychokinetic phenomena](#) began happening outside the sittings: in one incident, Levin's watch crystals cracked and his collar pins disappeared. At the same session, ['healing'](#) was performed on the eyes of two group members, who felt their eyeballs being gently manipulated though they had not removed their glasses.

The group's focus turned more from levitation and materialization to requests for advice on personal problems and larger questions. Members also began keeping formal records, recording exact dates, times, sitters present, room temperature and humidity. The intelligence gave illustrated instructions for a device that would allow it to speak, and the group eventually tried two devices, although with only slight success.

## Healing

The writer eventually introduced himself as 'Dr Bindelof', writing:

DURING MY PHYSICAL LIFE I WAS A DOCTOR. I LOVED MY WORK AS A MOTHER ADORES ITS CHILD. I DREAMT OF NOTHING DAY AND NIGHT BUT CURING THE ILLS OF HUMANITY ...

NOW I HAVE AT MY PERFECT CONTROL THIS TREMENDOUS FORCE WITH ITS BOUNDLESS HEALING POWERS ...

YOU HAVE A PANACEA. LET US PERFECT IT AND GIVE IT TO THE WORLD. YOUR RESULTS WILL LEAVE NO ROOM FOR DISPUTE. WILL YOU BE THE DISCIPLES OF A DEAD MAN?

In November 1933, Bindelof relieved the pain in Levin's abscessed tooth during a session. Levin felt pressure underneath the tooth, then relief; he also received a scolding from the doctor to eat more green vegetables for calcium and to visit the dentist.

Attempts at healing now became a regular occurrence during the Saturday sittings, and these often brought relief. Among those who benefitted were Lauer's mother, Joseph's mother, George Kaiser, Leo Kaiser, Howard Frisch and Roller's aunt Ellie. Each reported feeling touches of some sort, and then often a playful pat as the treatment ended.

Ellie described her experience as follows:

I suddenly felt a finger exploring the outside of my cheek. It did not feel the same as a human finger. Then I could feel it begin to go through my cheek, inside my mouth and touch the offending tooth. The pain stopped.[6](#)

Howard Frisch felt hands coming from behind him, massaging his eyes and head, when he was sitting 'in such a way that at the time it would have been impossible for anyone ... to approach me from behind'.[7](#)

## More Photographic Images

Using precise instructions from Bindelof, the group used a camera and film to capture three images. The photo of the 'common force' appeared to be lines and irregular blotches superimposed on the scene in the room. 'Outside entities' appeared as strange forms looking like soldiers carrying weapons, and Roller later theorized this image had come from his mind. A somewhat blurry portrait of Bindelof shows a stern-faced, bearded gentleman in Victorian-style dress.

## Problems and Dissolution

Larry Levin describes an incident in which six members of the group sneaked into a Manhattan cemetery and entered a mausoleum. Shortly they began to hear and then feel stones being thrown at them from the walls and ceiling. They quickly fled. At the next session they were scolded by Bindelof, who wrote

I BEG OF YOU BOYS NEVER TO DO WHAT YOU DID IN THAT TOMB AGAIN. BELIEVE ME I HAD DIFFICULTY IN AIDING YOU THEN.[8](#)

At this time Bindelof also expressed disillusion with the idea of carrying out healing through the group, complaining of a new lack of harmony and of 'inconstancy' on the part of the sitters.

Another personality appeared, a Dr Rinchner, announcing his presence with five knocks rather than Bindelof's trademark staccato, and writing in ordinary script rather than block capitals. A third personality calling itself only 'Bad' eventually appeared, writing in primitive English.

The admission of new members changed the dynamics of the group, which was further disrupted by a romantic rivalry. It broke up when Dr Bindelof ceased to manifest altogether and the phenomena seemed to lose their power. The group briefly reformed in March 1934 but was unable to repeat past successes.

## Attitudes

The youths, who were for the most part fairly scientific-minded, often suspected each other of creating the phenomena and controlled against fraud by making sure all feet and hands were in contact with those of others. They analyzed their experiences for plausibility, retained good records and kept all recorded manifestations, such as the photo plates and pages on which writing had appeared (now held by the [Parapsychology Foundation](#) in New York). Most were sceptical that it was created by the spirit of a deceased former doctor; the main exception was Larry Levin, who thought Bindelof was what he claimed to be.

Roller believes that his psychokinetic ability was key in the Bindelof phenomena. He writes: 'I don't think there is any doubt that I had been the source of the major occurrences in or out of the séance room, although I don't think I could have done it without the abundant energy of the others, especially, Larry and Lenny'.<sup>2</sup> Pilkington notes that Roller was never comfortable considering himself the group's medium.

Roller noted that his own case might have contributed to the theory that [poltergeist activity](#) is related to psychic energies that are active during puberty, as it had begun manifesting around him at that age. He cites the psychical researcher [Hereward Carrington](#) writing in 1930: 'An energy seems to be radiated from the body ... when the sexual energies are blossoming into maturity ... It would almost seem as if these energies instead of taking the normal course ... find this curious means of externalization'.<sup>10</sup>

## Later Life

Pilkington writes that the Bindelof phenomena altered the lives and perceptions of everyone who witnessed them. Montague Ullman became a psychiatrist and parapsychologist, founding the Dream Laboratory at Maimonides Hospital in New York, where he carried out [important work on telepathy and dreams](#) in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to Levin, several members of the group apart from Roller gathered in 1946 to attempt sittings, at first with little or no results. Roller was eventually persuaded to rejoin them, and with the addition of George Kaiser, six Bindelof alumni were able to achieve table movement, levitation and a message spelled out by the table tipping as they called out the alphabet, though the message was incomprehensible. Roller alone was able to bring about these phenomena in

sittings with other groups, and he reported that strange psychokinetic events continued to follow him in his regular life.

The group members were mostly successful in adult life, several entering the business world. Roller followed a career as an artist, writer, filmmaker and TV producer, dying aged 89 in 2004.

A video presentation by Gilbert Roller and Montague Ullman can be seen [here](#).

Montague Ullman's detailed account of the phenomena can be read starting [here](#).

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## Literature

Pilkington, R. (2006). *The Spirit Of Dr. Bindelof: The Enigma Of Séance Phenomena*. San Antonio, Texas, USA: Anomalist Books.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1.](#) Pilkington (2006), 19.
- [2.](#) Pilkington (2006), 21.
- [3.](#) Pilkington (2006), 23.
- [4.](#) Pilkington (2006), 25.
- [5.](#) Pilkington (2006), 27.
- [6.](#) Pilkington (2006), 46-47.
- [7.](#) Pilkington (2006), 48.
- [8.](#) Pilkington (2006), 34.
- [9.](#) Pilkington (2006), 69.
- [10.](#) Pilkington (2006), 8.