

The Buried Crosses

In 1914, a California medium named Violet Parent began receiving information about the location of relics that her 'spirit communicators' said had been buried in rural locations. Over a period of nine years, she and her husband Gregory tracked down some 1,500 such objects, most in the form of crude crosses, said to have been made by Aztec Indians and buried in religious rituals. After the Parents died the items were handed to Hamlin Garland, an investigator of mediumship, along with 22 notebooks in which Gregory Parent recorded the communications and details of the search.

Intrigued by the relics and their mysterious provenance, Garland, then in his seventies, decided to seek out more of them. He sought help from Sophia Williams, an independent voice medium, and through her was directed to the whereabouts of other artifacts. Not all of his subsequent searches were successful, but he was able to find sixteen relics similar in substance and design to those collected by the Parents, in ten widely separated locations throughout California and Mexico. Some were in deep gullies, others high on cactus-covered hills far from the highway. One was hidden in a ledge of sandstone behind a wall of cactus plants which Garland had to chop away.

Gregory and Violet Parent

The Parents lived in Redlands, California, some sixty miles east of Los Angeles. According to Gregory Parent's later account, Violet had been gifted with a psychic sense since birth, and following a serious illness in 1914, she began to experience involuntary trance states, during which she was said to see and [communicate with spirits of the dead](#). One was Father Junipero Serra, who had been a well-known missionary in California. For a period of ten years, he and other deceased missionary priests, also long-dead native Americans, were said to communicate instructions on how to locate certain buried caches, the purpose being to provide evidence of spirit communication and, concomitantly, life after death.

The couple followed the instructions, finding gold and silver coins, paper currency and other treasures buried in locations throughout central and southern California, in such containers as tin cans and rotted pocketbooks. The sums were sufficient to enable them to purchase a house and afford a standard of living beyond what they would normally have expected from Gregory's job as a grocery sales clerk. However, their communicators told them that the main purpose of the finds was to finance the search for Indian relics.

Hamlin Garland

Hamlin Garland (1860–1940) is remembered today primarily for his contributions to literature. He authored 52 books, including *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1922. He lectured widely on literary, social, and artistic matters, receiving honorary doctorate degrees from the

University of Wisconsin, Beloit College, Northwestern University, and the University of Southern California, which houses the Hamlin Garland Collection in its Doheny Memorial Library. The Hamlin Garland Society exists today to disseminate information on Garland's literary works; his early home in West Salem, Wisconsin is a national historic landmark and museum.

Garland was seriously involved in psychical research (a detail generally disregarded by his biographers). His 1936 book *Forty Years of Psychic Research* described numerous mediumistic phenomena he had observed and studied since 1891 as a member of the American Psychical Society, and later as a member of the London-based [Society for Psychical Research](#). Influenced by the philosophy of Herbert Spencer and the materialistic science of his day, Garland inclined – at least in public – to the view that all mediumistic phenomena not involving fraud were subconscious manifestations, in which subliminal personalities pretended to be spirits.

Violet Parent died in 1929. Five years later, Gregory Parent contacted Garland, having heard about his interest in psychic matters, to request that he write a book about the couple's finds. Garland was fully occupied at the time, and when he was able to follow up the matter two years later he discovered Parent had died. He traced Parent's sister, who gave him the seventeen cases containing the artifacts and 22 notebooks, saying Parent had wished him to have them.

After going through the notebooks, Garland concluded that 'this little grocer's clerk, in his bungling and tedious way, had honestly tried to make a scientific statement of his experiences as the husband of a woman who walked with spirits.'¹ Parent had noted that the communicators led them to money and other valuables only to help them carry on the work of finding the crosses and other relics, which themselves had no monetary value. They were usually encased in balls of adobe apparently so that they could not be distinguished from common rocks.

Parent also recorded that the spirits came to his wife night after night to give directions on how to reach the burial places. As the couple had no car, they were driven to the locations by friends and neighbours. Having reached a designated area, Violet would walk around until a 'strange chill' came over her. They would then dig and uncover various objects. It took them nine years and some 3,000 miles of motoring to find all the relics in their collection.

His curiosity further aroused, Garland set out to find the friends and neighbours in Redlands who had assisted the Parents in their discoveries. While many had died or moved away, he did locate fifteen 'intelligent and worthy citizens' and found that they all verified the story. One businessman recalled his scepticism when Violet told him that there were crosses under a large boulder. Using crowbars, two men moved the boulder, under which they found three crosses.

Over the next six months, Garland corresponded with five museums, including the Smithsonian and one in Mexico City. However, they were all uninterested in the finds, believing that the Indians could not have possessed metallic objects.

Sophia Williams

Sometime during early 1937, Garland asked Sophia Williams, a non-professional direct-voice medium whom he had met earlier, to assist him in his search for additional artifacts. A native of Chicago, Illinois, Williams had recently moved to California and had impressed Garland in a demonstration of her mediumistic gift. This did not require darkness, not even a red light, and she declined payment.

Garland subjected Williams to certain tests. She accurately [psychometrized](#) an object that Garland handed her. Then, with the amplification of a trumpet cone, and in full light, Garland heard the voice of an old friend, Henry Fuller, which became stronger as Garland spoke to it. Garland had mentioned Fuller in one of his books, which Williams might have read. But then another voice broke in and identified itself as that of Lorado, Garland's brother-in-law who had died some months earlier. This was more evidential: Garland was reasonably certain Williams could not have known of him. Moreover, Garland noted that Fuller addressed him as 'Garland', while Lorado addressed him as 'Hamlin', just as both had done when alive.

The most convincing evidence came when a male voice addressed Garland's stenographer Gaylord Beaman: 'Gay, this is Harry', giving his name as Friedlander. Harry Friedlander was a friend of Beaman's who had died in a plane crash in San Francisco Bay. The voice followed with details concerning the crash.²

Garland then devised a one-way electronic communication device so that he could pose questions to Williams's communicators, and hear their answers, while she was isolated in another room in Garland's home. She could neither hear what Garland was saying nor see what he was pointing to or looking at. The communicators continued to provide detailed relevant information, leading him to conclude definitively that the information was not coming from Williams.

Following these successful tests, Garland concluded that Williams could reliably help him in his search for additional artifacts. He then began hearing from other old friends and acquaintances. While Garland had by this time concluded that Williams was not a charlatan, he knew he had to be ready for claims that Williams had researched the matter before meeting him. But he considered it virtually impossible for any researcher to turn up some of these names from his past.

He continued to speculate that Williams might unknowingly be tapping into his subconscious. But this left unresolved the question of how a communicator generated by such an artificial process could exhibit the known behaviours of the deceased personality, and carry on a meaningful dialogue with the conscious self.

Garland-Williams Search for Artifacts

During the third sitting Violet Parent spoke, telling Garland that there were more crosses to be discovered and that because she was 'ig-ne-runt' she would ask Father Serra to direct the search. Since Garland had no clue as to where additional artifacts might be found, he felt that uncovering more of them would prove that the communications were not subconscious confabulations, but rather genuine contacts by deceased humans.

First, a communicator claiming the identity of George Parker Winship, an ethnologist when he was alive, explained that some of the crosses were from Central America – specifically Yucatan and Guatemala – and preceded Christianity. It was further explained that the Indians brought them from those countries during the sixteenth century when the invading Spaniards forced them to move to the west coast. When Serra appeared, he explained that the crosses were of pagan origin and that the Indians buried them in ceremonies to appease their gods, a practice which he had tried in vain to discourage.³

Following the directions of Serra and other ‘invisibles’, Garland and Williams travelled hundreds of miles through southern and central California and northern Mexico searching for more artifacts, often helped by friends or relatives. They were told where to go, where to stop, which direction to walk, and where to dig. Many trips were abortive, but in total they uncovered sixteen artifacts similar in substance and design to those collected by the Parents, in ten widely separated locations.

The story aroused considerable public interest following the publication of Garland’s book in 1939.⁴ Garland mounted a traveling exhibition that visited dozens of libraries and museums in the United States. He also did a radio broadcast for CBS’s *Strange as it Seems* programme, a dramatization of the book followed by an interview. He then contracted with the North American Film Corporation to do a one-hour educational film about the story, but died the following year before it could be made.

Nature and Origin of Artifacts

The origin of the crosses was never clearly determined by Garland. He devotes several chapters to his search for their origin, first pointing out that he found it difficult to find any experts willing to take them seriously. He also received a letter from the curator of the National Museum of Mexico saying:

After a study of the photographs which you sent us, we reply that these crosses were made in Mexico and distributed by the priests to their neophytes. They are about two-hundred years old.⁵

Garland states:

Many of these [artifacts] had been cleaned and burnished by Parent, but others were left as they came from the ground, covered with soil and rust, to indicate their exact appearance when found. The dates ran from 1769 to 1800. They had no ornament and the letter were block letters of varying sizes. About half of them rang like silver or bell metal.

These objects of relatively recent provenance were small in number. In a second, far larger class, Garland grouped pieces that impressed him as being ‘wholly barbaric in character and immensely older than the lettered pieces’.

Many were rude crosses of soft metal on which the heads of wolves, cougars, apes, baboons and birds were molded. On others, fruit, grains and shells were

represented. Two bore the footprint of a three-toed animal. They varied in length from two to twelve inches. Many were crusted deep with soil, and others were scarred by fire

Among these pieces were forty or fifty with double crossbars which Parent called 'rain crosses' for the reason that they had been used in prayers for rain

...

Among the items which I placed in a third category were mysterious plaques and crosses bearing faces which were neither Aztec nor Spanish in character, but were distinctly Oriental. Some of these heads wore turbans which suggested the head coverings of Moors or Arabs. Still more puzzling were wre monkey heads and ape snouts. Some of these simian heads wore crowns.⁶

Garland had Henry Fuller, his deceased friend, contact various deceased missionaries and Spanish explorers to communicate through the direct voice of Williams. Subsequent communications from personalities who identified themselves as such indicated that the crosses were mostly pagan artifacts that preceded the Christian missionaries.

A conversation between Garland and 'Father Serra' communicating through Williams went as follows:

Garland: Why were all these crosses buried on hills?

Serra: The Indians buried them there in ceremonies to appease their gods.

Garland: Did they keep these crosses and these ceremonies hidden from you? Is that the reason they are found at a distance from the missions?

Serra: Yes, we forbade these ceremonials, but of course we could not control the wild Indians and not always our neophytes.

Garland: Did you know when these savage ceremonials on the hills were taking place?

Serra: No. There were carried on secretly, far from the mission and in spite of us. We considered them barbaric survivals and opposed them.⁷

Garland further asked where the crosses came from. Serra responded, 'The people from Quiché brought the ancient ones.' Garland asked where they got there, by boat?

Serra: Some of them. Others walked. They settled among the California Indians.

Garland: That accounts for the mixture of mission and barbaric crosses.

Serra: That is correct.⁸

Later, Garland communicates with a 'Father Martinez', one of the missionaries:

Father Martinez, I want Señor [Juan] Onate [early 17th century Spanish explorer] to know that I have come into possession of a collection of crosses – fifteen hundred or more – which I am trying to validate. Some of them seem to me to be of the period before the Spaniards came, others are barbaric and much older. Many show Christian influence and are distinctly of the missions – made at the request of the Indians.

Martinez (through Sophia Williams): Your analysis is correct.

Garland: Father Martinez, it is highly necessary for me to authenticate these crosses, and the only way I can do that is to find similar ones myself.

Martinez (curtly): Which you have already done.

Garland: Yes, but three are not enough. I think I should have more to convince the skeptical.

Martinez: If you found many, many more, there would still be readers who would not believe.⁹

Garland communicating with 'Francisco Vasquez de Coronado':

Garland: Shall I address you as Señor Coronado or Capitan Coronado?

Coronado: Call me nothing but Coronado.

Garland: Coronado, this is my problem. I have before me specimens from a collection of some fifteen hundred artifacts which were recently discovered here in Southern California and whose authenticity has been called in question by several archaeologists.

Coronado: May I see them?

Garland: Most certainly. I am eager to show them to you and I should like to have you tell me if you saw objects of like nature among the Indians of Arizona and California in 1540. (Garland then laid a number of crosses upon the table.)

Coronado: I have seen many like them. They were very common. The Indians made many such crosses of various sizes and kinds.

Garland: Did you say the Indians made them?

Coronado: Yes, the Indians of the south. I saw many of them in Central America.

Garland: Did you actually see the southern Indians making them?

Coronado: No, but I did see them wearing them -- in Mexico and in Guatemala and Yucatan.

Garland: Were they made in Yucatan?

Coronado: They were made all over the southern part of the continent.

'Coronado' goes on to say:

The missionaries shrank from letting the Mother Church in Spain know that they had found these barbaric peoples already making use of the cross, and for that reason they carefully ignored it in their reports.¹⁰

A Father Espejo, who apparently preceded Father Serra, was summoned and communicated with Garland. Garland pointed out that many of them were neither Indian nor Spanish. Espejo replied:

They are Oriental. They were brought into Mexico and Central America by the Moors and Arabs, centuries before the Spanish came. As the tribes migrated, driven out by others, they carried these idols with them to ward off evil spirits or to invoke the good will of their gods.

Present Location

Twelve of the sixteen artifacts found by Garland are on display at the museum of West Salem Historical Society in West Salem. The whereabouts of the other four is unknown.

In 2011 Lisette Coly, granddaughter of trance medium [Eileen Garrett](#) and executive director of the [Parapsychology Foundation](#), discovered 27 artifacts, apparently part of the original 1,500 found by the Parents, in a box in her New York basement, having been sent to Garrett in 1966 by the son of Garland's publisher. (See photographs above.)

Sceptical Theories

Fraud by Williams

Garland's daughter Constance was sceptical about the buried crosses.¹¹ She made crosses in an iron skillet using molten medals and sand to show him how they could be easily fabricated. She believed Williams had an accomplice who went ahead and planted the artifacts before she and Garland arrived on the scene. However, apart from the effort of travelling hundreds of miles by car and hiking through hilly, cactus-covered terrain, it would have as difficult for the accomplice to give accurate directions as it would have been for Williams and Garland to follow them. The accomplice would also have had to conceal the objects without leaving traces, a possibility that Garland was always alert for.

On the other hand, the accomplice theory might explain why they did not find anything on several trips: Williams either failed to get clear directions from her accomplice or did not recognize the landmarks.

Another possibility is that Williams herself buried artifacts she had made, passed on to Garland the directions as having come from her spirit communicators, but then, visiting the location with Garland, was unable to remember the exact spot. That possibility cannot be completely ruled out. Again, a factor that weighs against it is the degree of effort and planning this would have involved. Car travel in the

1930s was far slower than it is now, and the journey would have involved long hours of driving time, often on poorly-surfaced back roads, as well as hiking over rugged terrain. It is unknown whether Williams was licensed to drive a car, which relatively few women did at this time.

None of this would account for the artifacts apparently previously recovered by the Parents, however. The fraud hypothesis would also need to offer a plausible motivation for a hoax of such complexity and labour intensiveness.

Garland asked the discarnate Henry Fuller about the abortive trips. Fuller explained that the Indians who provided the information through Serra knew only where the crosses had been buried, not where they ended up as a result of rain wash and erosion.

Presence of Aluminium

Metallurgical testing done on the original crosses showed the presence of aluminum, a modern metal not put to commercial use until the twentieth century. This created suspicions with regard to the true age and provenance of the crosses. However, this objection is not as fatal as might appear, since aluminum is the most abundant metal in the Earth's crust. The ancient Greeks and Romans are said to have used it as an astringent and mordant in dyeing, and in 1956, archaeologists excavating the tomb of a third century Chinese general found ornaments made of aluminum.

Famous Communicators

Scepticism was also aroused by the number of famous names said to have communicated to Garland through Williams. These included well-known figures involved in psychical research, notably [Arthur Conan Doyle](#), [William Crookes](#), [Gustave Geley](#), [William James](#) and [William T Stead](#). Garland also claimed to have heard from Rudyard Kipling, [Samuel Clemens \(Mark Twain\)](#), Jack London, and the famous explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado.

Supporting Evidence

Much rests on Garland's conviction, as an experienced investigator of mediumship, that the voices he heard talking in Williams's presence were too realistic to have been inventions of the medium, whether conscious or unconscious. In one session, Garland heard a deceased uncle playing a fiddle and whistling 'When You and I Were Young, Maggie.' He commented:

What shall we make of a test like this? Can ventriloquism produce such an effect over a one-way wire and through two closed doors? Furthermore, the tune moved in opposition to my thought. I had asked for a certain melody, and he played another, hence it did not come from my mind.¹²

Included in the appendix of *Buried Crosses* are letters from a dentist and a psychologist in Chicago, both of whom had treated Williams. The dentist wrote that while he was holding a celluloid matrix in Williams' mouth for a three-minute

duration, his dead wife's voice came in very distinctly and spoke with him. The voice appeared to be coming from the three-minute timing sandglass on the bracket in front of them.

Professor of psychology Arturo Fallico wrote that he had examined, observed, and tested Williams's psychic powers. He wrote to Garland: 'I do not hesitate in the least to say that we have, in her work and especially in certain portions of it, some principle operating which is not included in the orthodox categories of natural facts.' He went on to say that in her 'psychic visions' temporal and spatial limitations did not appear to be a barrier.¹³

Before he began his search, Garland had become certain that the phenomena he observed with mediums were in many cases genuinely paranormal. However, like many investigators he remained unsure whether they were communications from deceased spirits, or rather originated in the medium's subconscious. His experiences with the buried crosses convinced him of the reality of spirit communication.

Michael Tymn

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- ¹ Garland (1939), 21.
- ² Garland (1939), 52.
- ³ Garland (1939), 70-72.
- ⁴ Personal communication from Dr Keith Newlin, a professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington whose biography of Garland is cited in this article.
- ⁵ Garland (1939), 35.
- ⁶ Garland (1939), 36-38.
- ⁷ Garland (1939), 76-77.
- ⁸ Garland (1939) 76-77.
- ⁹ Garland (1939), 167-68.

- [10.](#) Garland (1939), 259-62.
- [11.](#) Personal communication from Dr Keith Newlin.
- [12.](#) Garland (1939), 230.
- [13.](#) Garland (1939), 322.

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