

## CHAPTER TWO

*“Believe in the Ouija board? I should say not.  
I’m not a spiritist. I’m a Presbyterian.”*

—WILLIAM FULD

**A**t this stage, one might be asking what makes such a simple object act as a doorway between worlds—after all, it’s only plastic and wood? You might also be wondering where the Ouija board originally came from, who invented it and how does it really work? Is it an ancient or modern invention? The answers are usually both contradictory and controversial because there is nothing more perplexing than the simplicity of how a Ouija board works, and although many have opinions, no one really knows its origin.

The Ouija board as we know it today originated around 1890. However, communicating with spirits and the Gods has occurred in every country since ancient times. Devices or methods similar to the talking board were used, long before the birth of Confucius, by the Chinese in order to communicate with their ancestors. Similar methods were and still are used in the En Chu Temples in Taiwan. Here, mediums known as *chi shengs* work either alone or in pairs. They sit before a large tray of white sand and in their hands they hold a V-shaped writing tool. After appropriate prayers, their hands begin to shake and the implement begins writing out messages in the sand.

In Greece, circa 540 B.C., the philosopher Pythagoras was said to use a special talking table on wheels. With hands placed upon the table it would move toward different signs and symbols. Pythagoras, or his pupil Philolaus, would then interpret the message to the waiting audience as being divine revelations supposedly from an unseen world. Some authors have even speculated the signs were merely the Greek alphabet. In ancient Rome we also find references to spirit boards. Some tribes of the American Indians used a spirit board, covered with strange symbols, which they called a *squidilatc*. The Ouija design itself may be relatively modern but the principle behind its use has been around ever since man first had a thirst to converse with the spirit world.

The Greeks had numerous unique ways of communicating with the realm of the spirits, although many of their methods are only speculation and it is often impossible to trace the origins of the stories that have come down to us. The Delphi oracles are one of the classic unsolved mysteries of the ancient world: although Greek historians have mentioned the oracles throughout the centuries, very little of the actual techniques that the priestesses employed were ever committed to paper. We know that the priestesses of Delphi were called the Pythia and were usually women over fifty, and rarely were there more than three of them at any given time. Pythia was a title taken from Pytho, the giant serpent that was slain by the god Apollo. Their temple was built over a large, circular, volcanic chasm on the southern slopes of Mount Parnassus in which it was believed Apollo had thrown the body of the slain Pytho.

History informs us that at the Temple of Delphi a large tripod was positioned over this chasm in a room known as the Adyton. The tripod was symbolic of the three phases of time ruled by Apollo: the past, present and the future. The tripod not only created the sacred Pythagorean symbol of the tetrahedron, but its base mimicked the magician's Magickal Triangle wherein entities are summoned and bound. In the

center of the tripod was said to hang a pendulum suspended by a long chain, although other historians have claimed that it was a small boiling pot of herbs. The priestess, or Pythiaon, would sit atop the tripod on a special chair. After making the appropriate animal sacrifice in the flames of the basin, Pythia would breathe in the rising smoke, which the Greeks believed to be inhabited by the oracles. At this point Pythia would become possessed and enter into a trance state. Some believe that her words became divine. Other historians point out that they were often incoherent gibberish and that the greater mystery may have lain in the swinging pendulum. Some have speculated that the gods would move it back and forth, answering the question of those who wished to consult the oracle with either yes or no. The description of the method that the Delphi oracles applied varies widely depending upon the Greek scholar or historical source. Still, the Greek historian Strabo (63 B.C.–21 A.D.), who wrote of Delphi, has stated, “of all oracles in the world it had a reputation of being most truthful.”

We know that small tripods and pendulums were widely used as a means of divination throughout ancient Greece. This particular type of communication carries the name which some believe goes as far back as Delphi. It is known as Dactylomancy. This term is derived from the fact that the intent behind the method of a pendulum was to communicate with the invisible entities or oracles called Dactyls. These oracles acted as go-betweens for mortals and Gods. The word Delphi comes from the Greek *delphos*, meaning womb, and legend has it that the Dactyls were born at Delphi. They came to birth when the sky goddess Rhea laid her fingers upon the earth and from each fingertip sprang forth an invisible child, five girls and five boys, whose destiny was to protect young Zeus from Kronos, his father. Zeus of course survived, and in turn became the father of Apollo, whose temple stands at Delphi.

Like many astral or invisible beings, the Dactyls were armed with shield and sword, often casting spells both good

and evil upon mankind at the request of those who summoned them. Some have even interpreted this ancient myth of Rhea to represent a type of practice that is symbolically linked with the talking boards. After all, when using a Ouija board, you lay their hands on the triangle and from your fingertips spring forth invisible children who are willing to communicate and assist in any way they can. As with many myths, this one has subtly woven itself into present-day society. The Greek word for finger is *dactyl*. Fingers have always been a powerful tool and have played an important role in many different mythologies, religions and in magick itself. Fingers are part of the hand, which Aleister Crowley refers to as the *magickal instrument par excellence*.

With the passage of time the sacred art of Dactylomancy has wrongly been reduced to imply any form of divination where pendulums or rings are used. One of the earliest recorded instances of divination by pendulum occurred in the fourth century. During this period, the Byzantine historian Ammianus Marcellinus tells how Fidustus, Patricius, and Hilarius were arrested for trying to divine the name of the Emperor who would succeed Valens (364–378 A.D.) by use of a pendulum. According to the story, they admitted to using a small round dish which had the alphabet painted around the rim. They suspended the pendulum in the middle of this dish, and when it began to move it spelled out the name of the great general Theodosius. Emperor Valens upon hearing this news was so outraged that he had the unsuspecting Theodosius immediately killed. However, the Gods are rarely wrong. What wasn't foreseen was that Theodosius' son, also named Theodosius, would become the next emperor upon the death of Valens.

The use of pendulums was widespread in the ancient world. Even up into the last century it was a standard practice for women to use their wedding rings attached to a string that they would suspend near a glass. This method was similar to

the ancient Roman technique. When a question was asked, the ring would begin to swing. If it struck the glass it implied a yes or no answer. The same results are achieved by suspending the pendulum between cards on which were written yes and no. A far more complicated version based upon this theme emerged with the pendulum suspended in the middle of a circle, around which the letters of the alphabet were laid out on individual cards, along with a yes and no card. When a question was asked, the pendulum would begin to swing toward one letter after another, slowly spelling out words.

Although this art was still called Dactylomancy during this early period of spiritism, the Dactyls were pushed aside, becoming little more than a Greek myth. The invisible kingdoms were becoming Christianized, bathed in either good or evil. Everything had to be black or white. Spiritists had to be careful when referring to the source behind their communications: asking for advice from the deceased was tolerated at best, while claiming to communicate with anything else was considered demonic and was often attacked by society. Myths like the Dactyls were seen as an imaginary or fictitious metaphor simply used to teach by example. The idea that within these myths is concealed greater truths was tragically ignored.

As for the triangle used with the talking boards, this appeared in the last century but it had absolutely no connection to Dactylomancy. It was often referred to as the “traveler” by many psychic researchers of the period, and like many implements it was born out of the age of spiritism with its table-rapping and spirit communications. Once introduced, spirit communications spread like wildfire. It seemed that every major city had its share of mediums and spiritists. The methods used in the attempts to communicate with a vast array of spiritual beings were so varied that they can only be summed up as creative.

One such method widely used in the last century was known as automatism. No one really knows how or where

automatic writing slipped into the picture, but this technique implies that an individual could be writing without any conscious awareness of his or her actions. While in a trance state, a pencil was placed between a medium's fingers and a piece of paper was slipped under their hand. Often the individual would begin scribbling strange notes, weird drawings or bizarre messages, usually in a handwriting totally different than that used by the person's conscious self, and sometimes even in a foreign language. It was generally believed that these messages came directly from a spirit who was guiding the hand of the medium but, in all honesty, most of what was achieved was simply unrecognizable scribbling.

Legend has it that an important development in automatism occurred in 1853. A French spiritualist named M. Planchette designed a unique device that was the original forerunner of the triangle used with our modern Ouija board. His triangle, or table as it's often called, was heart-shaped and made of wood. It had two small legs resting on tiny-wheeled casters to enable it to move easily, while the third leg in the front was a wooden pencil. The point was pushed downward through a tiny outlet lined with rubber to hold the pencil firmly in place. A person would rest their hand on top of this device before slipping into a trance. When the table moved, it spelled out the message on a piece of paper. To this day the pointer, or triangle, of a Ouija is often referred to as the planchet or planchette, named after its original inventor.

Others disagree with this piece of history, claiming that it was an earlier American spiritist named Thomas Welton who was the real inventor of the triangular device. It seems that Welton's fascination for crystal gazing in the 1850s was well-renowned. In fact, he even published a pamphlet titled *The Planchette* to express that he and not Planchette had created this device. Whether true or not, his claims have been all but ignored in history. Today it's generally believed that Planchette was the real inventor. Another controversial opinion on this

piece of historical rhetoric suggests that M. Planchette never existed: no hardcore evidence has ever surfaced to substantiate his life, even though authors are always writing about him as if he was a real person who had lived in France. Planchette is truly a mystery figure. For the sake of this argument, some historians have been quick to point out that the word “planchette” is simply a French term which could translate as “little plank” (Fr. *planche* — plank, board) which is, after all, what a planchette is. This is probably closer to the truth.

The design behind the modern talking board is equally webbed in historical myths, all very contradictory depending upon whom you’re reading. The nineteenth century was an age when anyone could spin a yarn, create a fable and tell the “truth” as they seemingly saw it. Plagiarism was running wild and history was being written, rewritten and often rewritten again by every individual who professed that they alone had created a device that people could use in order to communicate with the spirit world. If anyone has ever wondered why spiritists have gotten a bad reputation, they need only study the history of this period: many individuals who practiced Spiritism conducted themselves in an unscrupulous, if not shyster-like, manner bordering on stage-show antics. They often sold their trade from town to town as if it were a carnival sideshow. This makes writing an accurate history of the period of spiritualism almost impossible.

We do know that whoever came up with the “original” idea of the talking board borrowed pieces from many of the spiritualistic gadgets of their day. Their variation on Planchette’s device was to simply remove the pencil, thus allowing the triangle to point to a desired letter that had been painted upon a rectangular wooden board, one letter at a time, until a message was achieved. With this, two important methods of the period merged: the planchette and the idea of painting the alphabet on a separate board, which was probably taken from the earlier dial-plates machines.

The oldest written record of dial-plates is found in Allan Kardec's book *Le Livre des Mediums*, published in 1861. His real name was Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869) and he was considered by some to be the founder of French spiritism. He wrote the classic handbook titled *The Book of Spirits* that became the standard work on spiritualistic doctrine. The dial-plates themselves were a unique and cumbersome device. Most were circular boards with the alphabet painted either around the top or bottom part of the perimeter. We are not so concerned with those designs that required just one person to move the dial-plate, but are more interested in those dial-plates that required the use of two individuals. It is believed that they are the forerunner of the present-day design of the Ouija board.

These particular dial-plates had a long T-shaped bar balanced across the middle of an upright circular board. Two people held on to either side of the T-bar. The part that extended downward was the pointer. When the T-bar began to rock, it moved the pointer to different letters which had been painted around the bottom of the board. The innovation of making the pointer move by utilizing two people is a remarkable piece of genius. The means to achieve movement without conscious interference had been known for a while: many reputable individuals of that period in France had been experimenting with the concept that objects of extraordinary weight could be lifted and transported by the magnetic polarity inherently found in the Astral Light. This is something which spiritists did not discover or invent, but simply incorporated into their methods.

This ability to move objects had been used very successfully with table-tapping. This is where two or more people place their hands palm downward on a small wooden table, fingers outstretched to touch the person's fingers on either side, thus forming an unbroken circle. A question was then asked and the table would usually begin to rock, shake or gently move

across the floor. What was unique about this concept is that it confirmed that two or more people with no apparent psychic ability could move an object simply by placing their fingers upon it. Of course, like many practices, some spiritists degraded this art in order to make money—if a client was unable to move the table then the medium, fearing the loss of their bread and butter, assisted in a fraudulent manner by trickery.

Unfortunately, once one medium had been caught cheating, society blindly began to believe that *all* spiritists were frauds. Newspapers often looked for such sensational stories to sell their pulp, and gleefully spread diatribes about swindlers; there was very little rebuttal of a positive nature offered in the spiritists' defense. The sheer weight of bad publicity spelled the beginning of the end for the movement as a whole. The time was ripe for the emergence of the Ouija board. If the art was going to survive, it had to be taken away from the hands of the frauds and placed in the hands of humanity as a whole. Although the boards were publicly sold, the practice went behind closed doors and beyond the prying eyes of journalists and debunkers.

The earliest possible facts upon which historians can agree about the origins of the “Ouija” as we know it today center around E.C. Reiche, a coffin maker in Chestertown, Maryland. It is generally believed that he had a strong interest in spiritism and table-tapping due to his unique trade. He wanted to create a simple means to communicate with the deceased more for personal reasons rather than something for the public. Initially he “noticed sympathetically that a large table was a heavy thing for a frail spirit to juggle about [so] he devised a little table.”<sup>1</sup> When he teamed up with his two friends, Elijah J. Bond and Charles Kennard, they put their heads together and the three of them created the final design for the talking board. However, no written records survive which allow these facts to be easily verified. At this point we can only speculate as to what might have inspired these three gentlemen or from

where their original design might have come.

Of these three, E.C. Reiche seems to quietly disappear into history and is all but forgotten. Charles Kennard, on the other hand, opened the first company to manufacture the talking boards for the public in 1890. Other historians claim it was Elijah J. Bond who started the company, but its original name was the Kennard Novelty Company. Some believe both gentlemen simply worked together on this project and, later, each told the story as if they had founded the business. To add to the confusion, although the business was called the Kennard Novelty Company, the patent for the talking board filed in 1891 was in Elijah Bond's name.

Regardless of who started the company, prior to these two gentlemen, communing with the spirit world had been something reserved almost exclusively by mediumistic people who had special spiritualistic tools or implements at their disposal. With the emergence of Kennard's Ouija board this was no longer the case. Spirit communication was being sold openly to the general public, to anyone who had \$1.50 to buy a board, much to the dismay of psychics and mediums. The gates to the invisible world were thrown wide open and have been so ever since. Kennard's original advertisement in a local paper read: "Ouija. A Wonderful Talking Board. Interesting and mysterious; surpasses in its results, second sight, mind reading, clairvoyance; will give intelligent answers to any question. Proven at patent office before patent was allowed."

Although impossible to confirm, it is generally believed that while Kennard was using a talking board, a spirit told him the correct name for his new device. It was *Ouija*. The spirit explained that this was an ancient Egyptian word meaning "Good Luck." Some historians disagree, claiming that it was E.C. Reiche who had been working the board at the time when the name came through; others have suggested the confusion is due to the fact that both gentlemen may have been working the board together. Typical to the period, when recounting

what was obtained, each told the story as if he and he alone were present. Of course, modern Egyptologists are quick to point out that no such word exists in the Egyptian language, as far as they know. Nonetheless, this was how the name Ouija was originally obtained and it has stuck ever since.

The company ran fairly smoothly for Kennard in the beginning, but had he been using the board for advice he would have foreseen trouble. In early 1892 there was a hostile takeover of his company by two of his financial backers, Isaac and William Fuld. The latter had previously been the foreman of his company. In need of money, Kennard was forced to sell the business. The Fuld brothers then decided to file for another patent as the new owners, and registered such on July 19th, 1892. The patent was put in only William's name, which would later prove problematic for Isaac.

The two brothers immediately changed the name of their new company to the Ouija Novelty Company. William was said to have been an interesting and imaginative character who not only began to reinvent the history of the board, with himself as its inventor, but he also changed the story of what the word "Ouija" actually means. The tale that it was an Egyptian word obtained through the board fell by the wayside. In fostering a new mythos, William never denied that the board named itself, but changed the meaning behind the term Ouija. He started claiming that it was two different words put together, both of which mean "yes." One is French (*Oui*) and the other German, or *Ja*. This definition as a "yes-yes" board is what most people believe the word Ouija means.

As with the previous business, there were dark clouds on the horizon for this company as well. It was as if a curse had been evoked upon anyone who dared to make a profit off the spirits. Besides the fierce competition from numerous companies flooding the market with imitation talking boards, Isaac and William were having personal difficulties. This came to a head when Isaac was accused of bookkeeping shenanigans

by William, who subsequently fired him. William then changed the name of the company to the Baltimore Talking Board Company. He also made a unique change in the design of the planchette in 1910, which is still used today: he added a circular window to improve the viewing of the letters. Isaac went on to create his own talking board company called Oriole. His boards were almost an exact duplicate of the original design created by Kennard, except with Kennard's name removed and replaced with the name Oriole. Each board had a sticker on the back that read the Southern Toy Company.

Obviously, due to the personal animosity between the brothers, their companies were destined for further confrontation. This ended with both brothers in court arguing as to who should be credited with the original design on the patent. The future of both companies lay in the balance. Although the family gave their nod toward Isaac, it was William who ended up recognized by the courts as the board's creator. Sadly, Charles Kennard's earlier patent design was not even brought into the picture.

A reporter from *The Literary Digest* at the time voiced surprise over the fact that the Fuld brothers were fighting in court over who had created the original idea, commenting, "Why don't they ask the ouija itself regarding the division of the spoils? Wouldn't the Greeks have consulted the Delphic oracle if they had fallen into a dispute about said oracle?"<sup>2</sup> To this, William Fuld responded, "Believe in the Ouija board? I should say not. I'm not a spiritist. I'm a Presbyterian."<sup>3</sup> The reporter replies, "So there you are, ouija fans, Mr. Fuld makes the only ouija, patented in the United States and Canada and trade-marked all over the world, but he wouldn't trust it with so much as a question about the weather."<sup>4</sup>

However, many people didn't believe in William Fuld's public denial and felt that he had been secretly using the board behind closed doors, especially considering that in the early 1920s it became known that he decided to expand the company

and build a new building on the advice given to him through one of his own talking boards. A reporter, quick to pick up on this story, asked William whether or not he had been continuously consulting his Ouija board. He simply replied, “Nope. I built this factory on Ouija’s advice, but I haven’t consulted the board since then.”<sup>5</sup> As to why he stopped playing the board, he replied that since building the company everything was “moving along so well I didn’t want to start anything”<sup>6</sup> or to stir anything up. Although he no longer sought the advice of his talking board, or so he claimed, the company remained extremely successful for many years.

Then tragedy struck. In February of 1927 the headlines in the local paper read, “Wm. Fuld is Killed in Fall from Roof.”<sup>7</sup> It seems William accidentally fell off the roof of his Baltimore company and plunged three stories to his death. He was only 54. Of course there were immediate rumors circulating of a suicide, since the business had supposedly fallen on hard times. Others who were actually present disagreed, claiming that William was supervising the assembly of a new flagpole when the support post he was leaning against gave way. They said he simply fell backwards off the roof. Still, the suicide stories persist to this day. As for Isaac, he died twelve years later on November 18th, 1939 at the age of 74, never getting the credit some believe he deserved.

After William’s death the company was taken over by two of his sons, William and Hubert. At first, everything ran very smoothly but they began having difficulties supplying the quantity needed for the stores; some believe they simply wanted out of the business. Knowing this, the Parker Brothers approached the family in 1966 and found them receptive to the idea of another family-owned firm taking over as sole producer of the “mystifying oracle.” An article appeared in *The New York Times* that mentioned the sale of the company, titled “Monopoly on Ouija.”<sup>8</sup> It went on to say, “Parker Brothers, Inc, the Salem, Mass., maker of games such as Monopoly, announced yesterday

that it had acquired full ownership of William Fuld, Inc. ... This would ordinarily be a routine acquisition except that the Fuld group is owner of the registered United States trademark ‘Ouija.’” Parker Brothers had purchased the copyright and to this day still produces the same board under the registered trademarks of “Ouija Board” and “Mystifying Oracle.” For a brief period the Ouija Board even outsold Monopoly!

If you were to purchase the game today you’d find absolutely no information within the box except a piece of paper, about the size of a small filing card, which tells you how to mount the felt feet onto the triangle. At one time there was a booklet enclosed, or so I remembered as a child in the early ‘60s when my family owned a Ouija. I recently purchased the board to obtain this booklet but discovered no such thing in the box. When I tried to obtain a copy from Parker Brothers I was kindly told “The booklet that was included in the game is no longer available,”<sup>9</sup> end of subject. The only information on the Ouija is now found on the back of the box itself, where it simply states that “Whether you call it Wee-Gee ... or Wee-Ja ... the OUIJA board spells fun!” There is a brief paragraph on how to make the “plastic message indicator” move, which is their name for the planchette. The blurb on the box ends by stating, “What you do with the information it reveals is between you—and the Mystifying Oracle! OUIJA ... is only a game ... isn’t it?”<sup>10</sup> Regardless of such an alluring comment, the board is sold as if it were a child’s game that anyone can play without the slightest precautions.

Because of its toy status, any mention of the Ouija board becomes extremely complicated, if not controversial. It all boils down to whether one believes it’s a game or a means of communicating with entities from the other side, which was actually argued in a court of law. In 1920 the Baltimore Ouija Company fought hard against paying taxes on the grounds that the Ouija was a “scientific device” used as a means of amateur mediumship of a spiritual nature, and therefore should be

exempt by its religious status. They took the Internal Revenue Service to court in order to recover a whopping \$202.81 that it had protestingly paid in taxes.

However, the U.S. Court believed that although the board was unique and in a class by itself, it was still being sold in stores as a “sporting game” and was therefore taxable. The local headlines read “Nothing Occult in Ouija, Federal Court Rules. Boards are Taxable, according to Opinion Handed Down by Judge Rose.”<sup>11</sup> The company disagreed and appealed the decision, but to no avail. *The Baltimore Sun* reported: “Ouija Board is Taxable, Appellate Court Says. Judge Woods, in Richmond, Hands Down Opinion Affirming Baltimore Judgement.”<sup>12</sup> The court stated that the company “cannot pretend to be ignorant that it [Ouija] is very largely sold with the expectation that it is to be used as a means of social amusement or play and is actually so used. It is true that automatism is the basis for its use, but phenomena of psychical as well as of physical nature may be the basis for amusement and games.”<sup>13</sup> Not to be discouraged, the Baltimore Talking Board Company filed papers on May 13th, 1922 with the U.S. Supreme Court, who refused to hear their case and sided with the lower court ruling. The headlines in Baltimore: “The Supreme Court Refuses to Say What It Thinks of Ouija.”<sup>14</sup> The case was officially closed.

From that day forward it has become impossible to shake the stigma that a Ouija board is simply a game sold in toy stores around the world. The average person purchases the Ouija thinking it’s a toy for their child, rather than something far more dangerous. Parents and children alike, without the slightest magickal training or precautions, may ask their inane questions unaware of the possibility, albeit rare, that they can accidentally drag an invisible entity, their own “Captain Howdy,” through the board from the far reaches of another dimension into their world. With much regret some households with young children are subjected to all the horrors, both mental and physical, which the board might muster. As shocking as this

might sound, those individuals are closer to the board's truth than they may ever wish to know. Fortunately most people have become complacent because of the board's accessibility: they don't take it seriously, and in some ways this is good. The greatest saving grace protecting humanity has been its own ignorance as to the board's proper use.