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Cassadaga: The South's Oldest Spiritualist Community

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In an area known more for Christian fundamentalism than seances, Cassadaga is a rarity. A Spiritualist community embracing many New Age tenets on its journey into the next century, it also values its history and its origins in the northern New York Spiritualist communities of Lily Dale, Chautauqua and others. The editors have assembled studies of the community from several angles, by various authors, to explore the phenomenon of Spiritualism's southern home.

Spiritualism itself, championed by no less a personage than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, once focused heavily on seances. Though less in evidence today, it is obvious through the authors' research that residents of the community have a firm commitment to their faith and to the belief in spirit communication, whether with ghosts or with angels. Beginning with an overview of Spiritualism in America, the authors relate their findings on everything from Cassadaga's architecture to the structure of its spiritual makeup and its struggle to accommodate older, more conservative members as well as younger ones. One structure echoes the other, through a variety of styles that reflect varying needs, tastes and beliefs, but the spirit of Cassadaga continues to evolve as baby boomers seek spiritual enlightenment in ways that conventional churches cannot satisfy. Through faith healing and mediumship, Cassadaga seeks to keep alive the individualist spirit of its founders in the last century as it looks for answers to enter the next.

Some chapters will be more interesting to readers than others, much as some aspects of Spiritualism fill seekers' needs better than others. All the studies are interesting from a historical perspective, but where the book really comes alive is in the interviews with the older residents of the community, as well as in the study of Reverend Eloise Page, a prominent Cassadaga teacher. Their diverse paths and trials on the road to Spiritualism and the ways in which they met the challenges that their faith demanded of them is fascinating. Their stories reveal much

about the religion that is Spiritualism, and about the determination that has enabled Cassadaga itself to survive from one era into another while maintaining itself as a vibrant community.

The book concludes with some starkly beautiful photographs of functions at Cassadaga that say much about the tranquil spirit found there. Anyone interested in America's religious past and present will find this glimpse into a lesser-known area rewarding.

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