

www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/bal-al.ouija27apr27,0,1486780.story

baltimoresun.com

Let their spirits speak

One man can't rest until he learns the mystery behind the Ouija board, and he secrets that only two dead Baltimore brothers knew

By John Woestendiek

Sun Reporter

April 27, 2008

Perhaps if Bob Murch had thought to ask his first Ouija board, it might have told him what was ahead: meandering trips through dank graveyards, hours of rooting through archives for patent files and court transcripts, landing in the middle - and helping resolve - a nearly 100-year feud between the families of the two Baltimore brothers who marketed the "all-knowing" slab of wood.

But he didn't, and 15 years later, he's still immersed in his quest to document the history of "The Mystifying Oracle" - that diviner of the future, that gateway to the spirit world, that simple lettered board, born in Baltimore, that went on to become an icon of both pop culture and occult subculture.



Murch was merely doing a favor for some friends - wannabe frat boys in need of Ouija Boards for rush-related scavenger hunts - when he bought his first one at an antique store. He bought more at flea markets, and some online. Most had these words at the bottom:

WILLIAM FULD, BALTIMORE, MD., U.S.A.

Murch, yet to turn 20 and living in Salem, Mass., at the time, was intrigued by the obscure name, the slightly less obscure place and how they combined to spawn the Ouija Board. So he set out to find out more about the history of "talking boards," which were first mass marketed under the name Ouija.

Had it been the 1960s, the decade in which the Ouija Board reached its peak, Murch would have had few places to turn: the board itself, maybe, or the World Book Encyclopedia - the two shared bookcases in many a mainstream suburban home. This was the 1990s, though, and Murch had the Internet. One could rest a hand on a little plastic thing - come to think of it, a little like the Ouija Board's windowed planchette - and point and click for answers.

But, also like Ouija, the Internet could be pretty ambiguous, Murch found, leaving the same uncertainties that users of the Ouija Board had in earlier decades: Can I believe this? Is it telling me the truth, or simply what I already know? Is it leading me astray? Is it - gasp! - a tool of the devil?

"I found lots of conflicting information," said Murch, 34, who was raised an orthodox Jew and was turned onto the macabre and mystical by a sci-fi and horror-show-watching grandmother. "I decided to stop reading what everybody else said and start from scratch."

On the phone, through e-mail and in repeated visits to Baltimore, he pestered newspaper librarians for access to yellowing clip files and century-old articles on microfilm, pushed caretakers for access to their cemeteries and directions to gravesites, and prodded curators of historical societies and museums for any pieces they might have to the puzzle.

Much of Murch's time, though, has been spent researching family trees, seeking descendants of the men who first manufactured the Ouija Board - chief among them, William and Isaac Fuld, the two brothers whose falling out would lead to a 100-year silence between the two sides of the family.

Someday, it will all come together, Murch says, in a "coffee-table-type book," loaded with pictures of the board. For now, it's a Web site (williamfuld.com), where Murch holds a virtual monopoly on Ouija trivia.

But documenting the history of Ouija - which actually outsold Monopoly one year in the mid-1960s - isn't enough for Murch; he wants Baltimore to pay homage to it as well.

He's urging the city to designate as a historic landmark the former Ouija Board factory on Harford Road - the one from whose roof William Fuld fell to his death.

He has raised \$2,000 for a Ouija-style headstone for the unmarked grave in Green Mount Cemetery of Elijah Bond, the Baltimore attorney who first patented the board.

And he'd like to see a Ouija Board museum someday, located in Baltimore, of course.

It's not reaching those goals that keeps him searching. For Murch, an administrator for a Boston investment firm, the momentum is in the mystery - the new questions that come up, and the big one that lingers: What drove the Fuld brothers apart?

The Fuld's descendants don't know the answer - nor do they understand Murch's intense fascination with their family.

"We don't know why Bob is so interested," said Kathy Fuld, granddaughter of William Fuld. "I've never found it that particularly interesting."

"It was the oddest thing, somebody from that far away being so overly interested in my family," said Stuart Fuld, of Bel Air, grandson of Isaac Fuld.

William and Isaac Fuld made Ouija Boards together from 1898 until 1901, when Isaac was ousted from the Ouija Novelty Co. Isaac started making his own line of Ouija Boards, but was sued by William. Isaac then started making "Oriole Boards," from the same stencil as Ouija, with one word replaced. William badmouthed the boards as fake, and in 1919, Isaac sued him.

William Fuld won, and was a millionaire when he fell to his death while supervising the installation of a flagpole. The iron support he was holding came loose from the brick. By then, the Fuld brothers had gone 25 years without exchanging words.

The silence between the two sides of the family would go on for nearly another 75.

Isaac Fuld was born as the Civil War came to a close. William Fuld arrived five years later. They were two

of 10 children brought into the world by Jacob Fuld, a German immigrant, and Mary Abell, of York, Pa.

Both boys had wild imaginations, according to family stories dug up by Murch and, even as children, made up games to amuse themselves and others.

Isaac worked as a clerk, and later as a bookkeeper. William, at 17, went to work as a painter and varnisher. Around 1890, he was hired by the newly formed Kennard Novelty Company, located on the site of Charles Kennard's failed fertilizer business at 220 S. Charles St.

The patent for the Ouija Board was granted in the names of company officials Charles Kennard and William H.A. Maupin on Feb. 10, 1891.

It wasn't a purely original idea. Devices to help communicate with the dead, divine the future and make sense of the present go back 2,500 years, to places like China, Greece and Egypt. Native Americans, before Columbus, used instruments they called squidilac boards to talk to the dead, locate lost articles and find missing persons.

But Ouija most directly descended from the planchette, which appeared in France in the 1850s - a small piece of triangular or heart-shaped wood with wheels or cushions at two points and a pencil inserted through a hole in the third. Users rested their hands atop it, watched it mysteriously move across the page, then attempted to interpret the scribbles.

Murch found evidence that homemade talking boards were used in the U.S. well before 1891 - "Talking Boards Sweeping Ohio," read a local newspaper's headline in 1886 - but it was in Baltimore that the boards were first manufactured, and took on the name Ouija (derived, most agree, from the French and German words for "yes.")

The Kennard company manufactured the boards briefly. In 1892, Col. Washington Bowie - one of the original investors - reorganized and renamed the company, dismissing all but one of its other founders, moving the factory to 909 E. Pratt Street and putting William Fuld at the helm of the Ouija Novelty Company.

In 1898, under a three-year agreement, the manufacturing of the boards was turned over entirely to the Fuld brothers, who had formed Isaac Fuld & Brother a year before. When the agreement elapsed, Isaac was ousted.

Whether William and Isaac had a falling out preceding that decision, or the decision itself led to their bad feelings, the two brothers split, and it would be for good.

"The best I could understand, when one came in the front door, the other went out the back," said Stuart Fuld. "They weren't on speaking terms."

The silence between the two sides of the family lasted until 1997 when Murch - who had been in touch with both William's granddaughter, Kathy, and Isaac's grandson, Stuart - suggested they get together.

Three decades after Ouija was sold to Parker Bros. and left Baltimore, Kathy and Stuart - second cousins, living five miles apart - met for the first time at a diner on Joppa Road.

They've remained friends since. "We decided that, whatever their problem was," Stuart said, "it wasn't ours."

The sale of Ouija in 1966, and the closing of its Baltimore factory - at 1318 E. Fort Ave. - came as the board's popularity was peaking.

Since its inception, sales had always been cyclical - rising at times of national uncertainty, such as during wars, when many families turned to the boards in hopes of reassurance about family members overseas.

The year after Parker Bros. took over production, Ouija outsold its most popular board game, Monopoly. Today, only a plastic glow-in-the-dark version is produced, under the company name Hasbro, and the company does little in the way of marketing, likely because the game has been a target of religious fundamentalists.

William Fuld's name was kept on the board for a while - Murch thinks it was to lend authenticity - but later dropped. Hasbro and Parker Bros. declined to talk about the decision to take the name off, or provide sales figures for the board that, for a while, made the supernatural a suburban staple.

Artist Sandra Magsamen, a great-granddaughter of Isaac Fuld remembers - like most children of the 1960s - consulting the board, sitting under the Ping-Pong table with friends, asking the board the typical questions: "Will I get married? How many kids will I have?" She's turned to it a few times as an adult. When pregnant, she asked the board what her daughter would be named. The board spelled out "Lulu." She named her Hannah.

For his part, William Fuld - while capitalizing on the Victorian-era fascination with communing with the spirit world - never maintained the board had spiritual powers. It was a parlor game, plain and simple.

"Believe in the Ouija Board?" he was quoted as saying in 1920 newspaper interview, "I should say not. I'm no spiritualist. I'm a Presbyterian."

William Fuld ran the company until his death in 1927. Isaac Fuld, after the falling out with his brother, went into the insurance business. Ironically, his "Oriole Board," being rarer than Ouija, now draws higher bidders on Internet auction sites.

"I go to the eBay every now and then and see how crazy all these people are to pay all this money for a wooden board," said his grandson Stuart, 74. "People pay \$500 for an Oriole Board now. That's probably more money than my grandfather ever made on it."

On an unusually balmy February morning, Bob Murch arrived at Baltimore's Green Mount Cemetery, a camera in one hand and a map in the other.

He had come to find the unmarked grave of the man who patented the Ouija Board - attorney Elijah Bond.

"He's up on section J," Murch told Baltimore historian Wayne Schaumburg, who had agreed to help him out.

They found what appeared to be the spot - it's a bit ambiguous - behind the marked graves of the Peters family, into which Bond married. Murch took photos of the grass.

"It's a little anti-climactic," he said of the discovery.

Murch - as part of his admittedly obsessive quest to ensure that Ouija's makers aren't forgotten - collected \$2,000 in donations and has contracted with the Tegeler Monument Company in Baltimore to craft a headstone for Bond, the back of which will resemble a Ouija Board. He hopes to install it on Halloween.

"Nearly everybody has a Ouija story, but of all the people involved with its invention, none have been remembered," Murch said. "People don't have any idea who they are."

Mitch Horowitz, a New York author who specializes in the metaphysical, praised the research Murch has done.

In the age of computers and video games, the Ouija Board seems to be fading away, Horowitz said - despite our continuing interest in the spiritual world.

"There has always been a hunger to mitigate our fears by understanding something about the future, or mitigate grief or loss by believing that we can reach the other world," he said.

But while TV shows are filled with psychics and mediums, he added, the Ouija Board - in an era of political and religious correctness - seems to have sunk below the radar.

Murch doesn't think Ouija is headed for oblivion. But if it is, that makes his work more urgent.

"People call me obsessed, and it's true. ... I will beg, borrow and steal to get this information."

Some of that information, he acknowledges, such as the cause of the Fuld feud, might turn out to be ungettable.

"There has been speculation that some money was lost, that Isaac wouldn't hand over the books. But from what I know about William, if there was money lost, he would have sued to get it back. Maybe it was some little thing that just escalated."

"It could have been money, it could have been a multitude of things," said grandson Stuart Fuld. "It would be interesting to find out what started it. But unless the crazy board tells us, I don't think we will ever know."

john.woestendiek@baltsun.com

Copyright © 2008, [The Baltimore Sun](#)