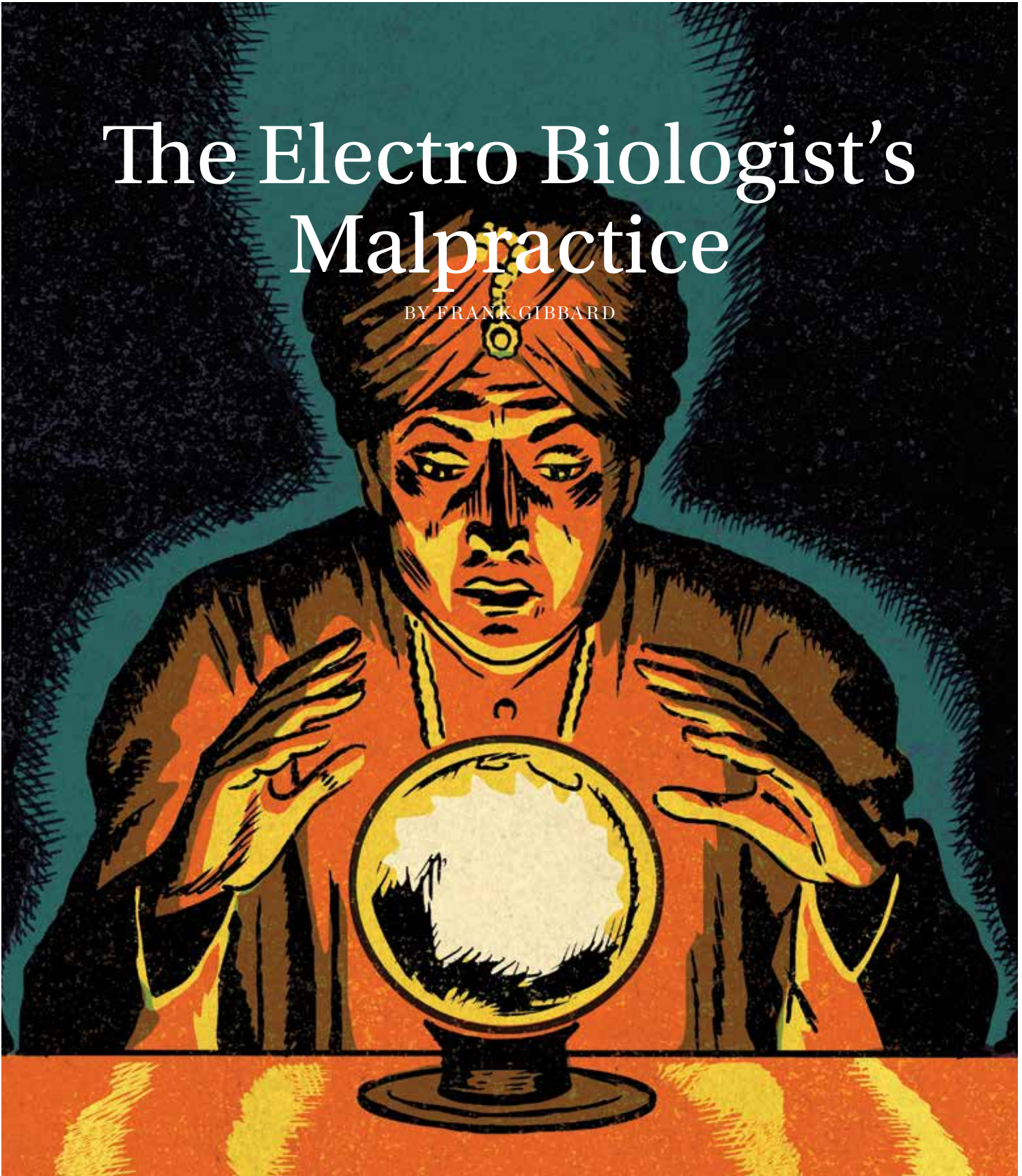


# The Electro Biologist's Malpractice

BY FRANK GIBBARD



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**D**r. Elma M. Gill was a psychic healer, spiritualist, and clairvoyant who was active in the 1910s and 1920s. Although she bore the title of “Dr.” and claimed a professional affiliation with the “Kosman Spiritualist Institute of Colorado Springs,” she was sometimes accused of being nothing more than a fortune-teller and fraud. These accusations sometimes led her into brushes with the law or to being named in civil litigation. The persecution she endured may have contributed to her itinerant lifestyle, which saw her relocate throughout the Western United States and Canada during this period. If Dr. Gill had a home base, it was in Colorado, and it was in this state that an early failed cure landed her in the Colorado Supreme Court.

#### **An Eclectic Psychic and Healer**

Dr. Gill claimed many titles over the years. In 1910 in Oakland, California, she billed herself a “trance medium and healer.”<sup>1</sup> She was “pastor” of the Unity Spiritual Church in Oakland<sup>2</sup> and was sometimes referred to as the “Rev. Dr. Gill.” In Wichita Falls, Texas, she advertised her services as a “spiritualist medium, lecturer and teacher.”<sup>3</sup> But it was an unusual title that she used in Colorado, and its disclosure to a jury, that contributed to a principal issue in her Colorado litigation.

#### **The Schneider Case**

The Schneider case arose around 1910, near the outset of Dr. Gill’s career. Louise Schneider suffered from tumors; it is unclear whether they were benign or malignant.<sup>4</sup> She sought out Dr. Gill for healing. Dr. Gill promised to remove the tumors in three months through nonsurgical means. Schneider agreed to pay her \$50 for the first month’s treatment and \$40 for the second and third months, all in advance. Dr. Gill provided receipts for her payments. Unfortunately, the treatment did not remove or alleviate the tumors, so Schneider turned to a regular doctor, who surgically removed them. Schneider then sued Dr. Gill for the \$130 she had paid plus wages she had lost in her occupation as a cook.<sup>5</sup> She won a verdict in her favor in county court, and Dr. Gill appealed the verdict to the Colorado Supreme Court.

On appeal, Dr. Gill presented several issues. She first argued that Schneider was required to elect to proceed on either her theory of breach of contract or for fraud but had failed to specify her cause of action. The Court held that Dr. Gill had waived this argument by failing to present it in the trial court, and in any event, there was no basis for requiring such an election of legal theories in the case.

**Less than a year later, in January 1922, Dr. Gill found herself facing a criminal charge in Lincoln, Nebraska, where she had once again delivered a lecture entitled “Where Are Our Dead?” Shortly thereafter, she was arraigned in police court in Lincoln, charged with being a clairvoyant and fortune-teller.**

Dr. Gill next complained about the admission of the first two treatment receipts, which she had written to Schneider on the back of her business cards. The problem was that the jury could also see what was printed on the front side of the cards. The business cards read:

Elma M. Gill  
The Electro Biologist

Can cure any and all chronic diseases, also remove cancers and tumors without operation or drugs. 217 S. 4th Street. West Colorado Springs.<sup>6</sup>

The Court expressed some confusion about this claim, stating it was “difficult to understand in what particular the defendant claims it was error to admit these cards.”<sup>7</sup> The cards represented that Dr. Gill could remove tumors, which was exactly what she had promised Schneider that she would do.

Perhaps Dr. Gill was embarrassed that she had called herself “The Electro Biologist,” which in retrospect seems like a title worthy of a carnival act and may have been particularly embarrassing, given her failure to effect a cure in Schneider’s case. To be sure, electrobiology is a legitimate science that studies the production and use of electricity by biological organisms.<sup>8</sup> But Dr. Gill likely used the phrase in its obsolete and somewhat occult sense, referring to a cure effected by “animal magnetism” and hypnotism.<sup>9</sup> In any event, the Court held the business cards were properly admitted into evidence.

The Court also rejected Dr. Gill’s objections to some of the jury instructions, finding upon review of all the instructions given that she had failed to establish a reversible error. Finally, the Court declined to review the sufficiency of the evidence, because “the evidence appearing in the abstract is conflicting, and further it appears from the abstract itself that much of the evidence has been omitted.”<sup>10</sup> It affirmed the judgment in favor of Schneider.

#### **A Wandering Lecturer**

After her loss in the Schneider case, Dr. Gill spent the next two decades traveling the United States and Canada giving entranced (and perhaps entrancing) lectures on metaphysical topics. In July 1911, she and her son gave a lecture and demonstration to the Ministers’ and Mediums’ Ministerial Association of Portland, Oregon.<sup>11</sup> In March 1912, she gave a talk in Victoria, British Columbia, on “The Duality of Man.”<sup>12</sup> In Vancouver, B.C., she promised to “lecture (while entranced)” on “occultism.”<sup>13</sup> In November 1912, she gave a talk in Kansas City, Missouri, on “Signs of the Times.”<sup>14</sup> That same year she lectured on “Power of Spirit” in Butte, Montana.<sup>15</sup> In 1913, her



“trance lecture” in Decatur, Illinois, discussed “The Spirit World, the Unseen World, Where is it?”<sup>16</sup> and she also lectured in that city on “Do Our Spirit Friends Return? If so, Why?”<sup>17</sup> She lectured in Lincoln, Nebraska, on “Obsession vs. Insanity.”<sup>18</sup> But by far her best-known talk, which she delivered (among other places) in Wichita Falls, Texas,<sup>19</sup> Anaconda, Montana,<sup>20</sup> and at the Orpheum Theater in Nanaimo, British Columbia, attempted to answer the question, “Where Are Our Dead?”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to giving consultations and demonstrations before audiences, Dr. Gill offered help by mail. In 1912, she ran an advertisement

in a newspaper in Libby, Montana, offering readings by mail on a range of topics, including “spiritual diagnosis of physical diseases” and “development of mediumship and your personal magnetism.”<sup>22</sup> Interested parties were advised to send a dollar to an address in Seattle.<sup>23</sup>

In 1920, she ran a classified ad in a Texas newspaper advising her devotees that she had returned to Colorado Springs but that she would give readings on “oil, business, and all affairs of life” by mail for a \$5 fee.<sup>24</sup> (It didn’t take a clairvoyant to know that residents of Wichita Falls, Texas, in the 1920s were acutely interested in advice concerning the oil business.)

#### **More Litigation Involving Dr. Gill**

Dr. Gill eventually became a defendant in civil and criminal actions related to her psychic activities. An unusual civil case arose in Wichita Falls in 1921. According to a newspaper account, it began with a series of lectures Dr. Gill gave at the Labor Temple, during which she went into a trance and, among other things, spoke in a masculine voice to deliver a lecture by Robert Ingersoll.<sup>25</sup> (Robert Greene Ingersoll, 1833–99, was a famous agnostic orator known for his bombastic assaults on organized religion. What he would have thought about being “channeled” after his death by a medium is difficult to imagine.)

One of the attendees at the Ingersoll lecture was a widow named Ada Holden. According to Holden's allegations in a later lawsuit, Dr. Gill, while acting as a medium, told Holden that her deceased husband was telling Holden to assume the lease on some property held by Ida Alexander. He also wanted her to buy furniture from Alexander. Holden took her dead husband's purported advice and made the purchases. Playing a dual role in this transaction as both "medium" and intermediary, Dr. Gill purportedly acted as Alexander's agent in connection with the sale.

There was a problem, however. The owner of the real estate, a Mrs. Fowler of Fort Worth, Texas, refused to transfer the lease.<sup>26</sup> To resolve this problem, Holden, Alexander, and Dr. Gill went to Dr. Gill's room to "sit for Mrs. Fowler."<sup>27</sup> The aim of this sitting was to convince Fowler (remotely) to transfer the lease using "mind concentration."<sup>28</sup> Apparently, this did not work, because Holden later sued Alexander and Dr. Gill to get her money back. It is unclear whether her suit was successful.

Less than a year later, in January 1922, Dr. Gill found herself facing a criminal charge in Lincoln, Nebraska, where she had once again delivered a lecture entitled "Where Are Our Dead?"<sup>29</sup> Shortly thereafter, she was arraigned in police court in Lincoln, charged with being a clairvoyant and fortune-teller.<sup>30</sup> She pleaded not guilty and stated she was an ordained minister and a believer in spiritualism. She denied that she had told any fortunes.<sup>31</sup>

Before she could be tried for the offense, however, Dr. Gill fled the city. After she left, the landlord at her rooming house took a letter to the police that he found in her room. The letter first accused Dr. Gill of being a fraud, and then took a threatening tone. Its author wrote:

I want to inform you that you have only five days to leave the city or you will be handled very roughly and maybe killed. Now this is final. Don't let the grass grow under your feet. (Signed) The White Cap Association.<sup>32</sup>

Who or what the Lincoln, Nebraska "White Cap Association" was,<sup>33</sup> and what happened to the criminal charges against Dr. Gill, is unclear. But a newspaper account predictably teased Dr. Gill for fleeing the city after receiving warnings


from both the White Cap Association and the spirit world.<sup>34</sup>

### Aftermath

After the 1920s, Dr. Gill faded from the public eye. She may be the person named "Elma M. Gill" who is buried at Crown Hill Cemetery in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, whose headstone shows she lived from 1867 to 1934.<sup>35</sup> Even less information is available concerning the Kosman Spiritualist Institute, though occasionally one of the institute's vintage pamphlets appears for sale on an internet auction site.

### Conclusion

The human mind has recuperative powers that are difficult to explain under a naively physicalist approach. That is why drug manufacturers must account for the placebo effect, in which people

get better because they believe they will, even if they consume an inert substance with no medicinal properties. Occasionally a healer may also achieve seemingly inexplicable cures without resort to medical science. An intriguing example of this was the famous preacher and healer Bruno Groening, who was active in West Germany after World War II and recently profiled in a book about unusual supernatural beliefs in Germany after the war.<sup>36</sup> But as the Schneider case reminds us, it is risky to forgo tried-and-true medical treatments that can often heal what ails us. 



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### NOTES

1. *Oakland Tribune*, p. 17, col. 7 (May 3, 1910).
2. *Oakland Tribune*, p. 8, col. 3 (June 11, 1910).
3. *Times Record News*, p. 9, col. 3 (Mar. 20, 1924).
4. See *Gill v. Schneider*, 110 P. 62, 63 (Colo. 1910).
5. See *id.*
6. *Id.*
7. *Id.* at 64.
8. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/electrobiology>.
9. *Id.*
10. *Schneider*, 110 P. at 64.
11. *Oregon Daily J.*, p. 9, col. 5 (July 1, 1911).
12. "Spiritualist Meeting," *Victoria Daily Times*, p. 23, col. 4 (Mar. 30, 1912).
13. *Vancouver Daily World*, p. 26, col. 3 (June 18, 1912).
14. *Kansas City Star*, p. 10, col. 2 (Nov. 16, 1912).
15. *Butte Miner*, p. 7, col. 1 (Sept. 7, 1912).
16. "Spiritual Science Society," *Decatur Herald and Rev.*, p. 23, col. 7 (June 15, 1913).
17. "Spiritual Science," *Decatur Herald and Rev.*, p. 14, col. 3 (June 1, 1913).
18. *Nebraska State J.*, p. 11, col. 1 (Feb. 18, 1922).
19. "Spiritualist Mass Meeting," *Wichita Falls Times*, p. 22, col. 3 (Nov. 7, 1920).
20. *Anaconda Standard*, p. 6, col. 5 (Aug. 24, 1912).
21. *Nanaimo Daily News*, p. 6, col. 5 (July 11, 1912).
22. *Libby Herald*, p. 7, col. 4 (Feb. 15, 1912).
23. See *id.*
24. *Wichita Falls Times*, p. 14, col. 1 (June 17,

- 1920).
25. "Defendant Says Did Not Believe in Spiritualism," *Wichita Falls Times*, p. 7, col. 2 (Nov. 22, 1921).
26. See *id.*
27. *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).
28. *Id.*
29. *Lincoln Sunday Star*, p. 2, col. 5 (Jan. 29, 1922).
30. *Lincoln J. Star*, p. 10, col. 1 (Feb. 20, 1922).
31. See *id.*
32. "Mrs. Gill is Missing Now," *Lincoln J. Star*, p. 1, col. 3 (Feb. 27, 1922).
33. There is evidence of other vigilante activity against Mormons, for example, by an association using the "White Cap" name and threatening to "white cap" its victims. See <https://www.deseret.com/2011/4/25/20371674/personal-perspective-to-pioneer-era-mormon-persecutions-in-the-south>.
34. See *id.*
35. See [https://peoplelegacy.com/elma\\_m\\_gill-6720741](https://peoplelegacy.com/elma_m_gill-6720741).
36. See Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder-Doctors and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (Metropolitan Books 2020).