

Paradise in a Breakfast Bowl

Albert Webster Egerly and the Gospel of Glame

John Benedict Buescher

Imagine a man struggling for years in obscurity—suddenly finding himself popular, dominating, successful! Imagine yourself suddenly discovering a strange, new power that enables you to attract new friends, new achievements! Picture everyone's amazement if you unexpectedly changed your entire personality, banished self-consciousness and became instead a vibrant, fascinating, magnetic person! A thrilling experience! Yet it can be yours—and I'll prove it.¹

But first, eat your cereal. Try Instant Ralston. It will make a New Man out of you. So saith Dr. Ralston.

Pre-processed, dry breakfast cereal was invented by American health reformers who wished to create a food that was convenient, healthy, and tasty, but who also believed that such a food would regenerate mankind in a spiritual sense. They wished to remake Man into a “New Man,” to reunite the human spirit and body, and to bring humans back to the original state in which they lived in the Garden of Eden. This is one of the keys to understanding the health and food reforms in nineteenth-century America.

Some of the deepest roots of health food reform are ultimately traceable back to the Hermetic Revival of the Renaissance, with its vision of a spiritual and moral regeneration of Man through a deliberately induced physical process of inner alchemy and a close attention to the Doctrine of Signatures. Those roots certainly can be thereby traced through the speculations and experimental efforts of German Pietists influenced by the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme, and reinforced by the Gnostic sensibility animating the Calvinist search for evidences of divine election scattered about in the fallen world of matter.

Nevertheless, it is in the writings of the eighteenth-century spiritual visionary and royal engineer Emmanuel Swedenborg—in which we can read unblushing accounts of the hat sizes and styles of the various orders of angels (as Emerson pointed out) and in which we can seem to scry even the spiritually significant plumbing valves and mechanical couplings of Heaven—that we can see the notion at full play that humans' religious and moral constitutions could be deliberately engineered by placing them in an enlightened, physically reorganized society. From Swedenborg's dream journal, in his entry for March 24, 1744, we read an example of this conviction, which treats the sacramentalization of the world as an issue of engineering and physiology:

¹ Ralston University Press ad, *Popular Mechanics*, October 1929.

I was standing by a machine which was moved by a wheel; its spokes involved me more and more and carried me up so that I could not escape; I awoke. [It signifies] either that I need to be kept further in the dilemma, or else that it concerned the lungs in the womb, on which subject I then wrote immediately afterwards; both.²

Spiritual regeneration, it seemed, could be accomplished, and Heaven regained, by physical means because—and the conviction came like a thunderbolt of illumination—matter was a mode of spirit; the physical part of human nature was the specifiable counterpart of its spiritual or moral nature. Most importantly, the physical part could be modified, reformed, and regenerated without recourse, one might say, to grace or the sacraments of the Church. If a merely human generation had yielded a corrupted human nature, then an uncorrupted or purely spiritual regeneration, deliberately undertaken, could break the age-long chain, bypassing corruption altogether, and yield a new race of humans. Thus were born phrenology, health reform, prohibitions of alcohol, marriage reform, and all the batch of social movements and causes meant to make over Earth into a Heaven, the intransigent matter of the body into an ethereal spirit, and humans into angels.

A Cook's Tour of the History of Health Food in Nineteenth-Century America

Swedenborg saw salvation as a transcendence of the body and an ascent to pure spirit. For him, grains, nuts, and fruit were “spiritual food,” the eating of which was compatible with “a state of resurrection to spiritual existence.” Eating meat, however, “tended to inflame the passions, and to sensualise the man; and consequently to impede the reception in the soul, of heavenly love and wisdom.”

Influenced by Swedenborg, one of his American followers, Joseph Metcalfe, founded the Bible Christian Church of Philadelphia in 1817.³ He was convinced that

² C. Th. Odhner, trans. *Emanuel Swedenborg's Journal of Dreams and Spiritual Experiences in the Year Seventeen Hundred and Forty-Four* (Bryn Athyn, Penn.: Academy Book Room, 1918), 14.

³ *History of the Philadelphia Bible-Christian Church, for the First Century of its Existence, from 1817 to 1917* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1922). One of the ministers who succeeded him and served the church beginning from 1876 was Henry S. Clubb, who founded the Vegetarian Society of America. Earlier, from 1853-54, Reverend Clubb had attempted to lead a band of vegetarian followers out to “bleeding Kansas” during the abolition war to found a utopian community, named “Octagon” (influenced by vegetarian, phrenologist, and speculative architect Orson S. Fowler and by Bronson Alcott’s vegetarian community of “Fruitlands”) on the Neosha River, and to thereby investigate the question, “Is Edenic life practical?” Apparently not, at least not in this case, as the community quickly dissolved; see Adam D. Shprintzen, *The Vegetarian Crusade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

vegetarianism was essential to Christianity, pointing to the Biblical verse where God in the Garden of Eden appointed the food that Adam was to eat—"Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed ... to you it shall be for food." (Genesis 1:29) This was an Antediluvian diet, an "Edenic diet," whereby humans, before God's covenant with Noah, were not allowed to eat meat (Genesis 9:3-5).⁴ Metcalfe enjoined the use of bread made from whole-wheat meal, objecting to the millers' practice of removing the bran, "the live germ," from wheat, justifying his anathema of white bread by the Biblical command, "Do not put asunder what God hath joined together."

One of Metcalfe's ideological successors, convinced that banning meat from the human diet would eliminate the brutish portion of human nature and would turn it into a fully peaceful, angelic one, later wrote:

The gospel worker should be pre-eminently a respecter of the rights of all God's creatures. Imbued with the spirit of the Master, his mission will be not to destroy life, but to save it. The paternal love of God, which extends to sparrows, will pervade his life, making him kind and tender toward all creatures. The happiness of heaven would be restored if the fundamental principles of the gospel—peace and good will—could be fully established among men. Then, none would 'hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.' Then men would love one another, and oppression would cease. Then men would love the creatures beneath them, and would cease to eat them. The Edenic diet would be restored; for this, also, is included in the plan of the gospel.⁵

Sylvester Graham (1794-1851) was the most renowned food reformer of nineteenth-century America. He was ordained a Presbyterian minister but was profoundly influenced by the vegetarian doctrines of the Philadelphia Bible Christian Church. He wrote *The Philosophy of Sacred History Considered in Relation to Human Aliment and the Wines of Scripture* (published posthumously in 1855). Graham was known by the nickname of "Doctor Sawdust" because of his unflinching,

⁴ The "Edenic Diet" was promoted most famously by Isaac and Sara Rumford, who founded a vegetarian colony, Joyful, at Bakersfield, California in the mid-1880s. The Edenic Diet in its most pristine form consisted of nuts and uncooked fruit ("Fruitarian"), although some backsliders also included grains and vegetables. Isaac Rumford wrote, *The Edenic Diet: the path to health and freedom* (1885) and *The Edenic Diet: the philosophy of eating for the physical and mental man* (1889). Today's wish to return to a somehow more spiritually fit "Paleo diet" was foreshadowed by Rumford's proselytizing; see Frederic R. Lees, *An Argument on the Primitive Diet of Man* (1857), and "Shall We Return to an Archaic Diet" *Phrenological Journal* (April 1884): 226.

⁵ G. C. Tenney, "Good Will Among Men," *The Medical Missionary and Gospel of Health* 10.3. (February 1900): 68-69. See also Reuben Perry, *The Influence of Food on Character*.

nationwide lecture tours promoting the virtues of bread made with whole-wheat ("Graham") flour, but also as a backhanded reference to his publicly unflappable self-righteous eccentricities. His followers set up "Graham hotels," like small, provisional utopias, where guests following Graham's dietary regimen could board with like-minded Progressives, undertake gymnastics or other light exercises, and partake of vegetarian meals, eschewing tobacco, alcohol, coffee, tea, sugar, salt, spices, condiments, shellfish, and meat.⁶

Dr. Russell Thacher Trall (1812-1877) was a water-cure physician who opened the Hygieo-Therapeutic Institute in Manhattan in 1843, having become converted to the theories and practices of hydropathy developed by European physician Vincent Priessnitz. If whole-wheat flour was Sylvester Graham's substitute for the Eucharist, then immersion of the body in water, externally and internally, was Trall's substitute for Baptism. Like Sylvester Graham, Dr. Trall was an advocate of the retention of "precious bodily fluids" (as *Dr. Strangelove* would later phrase it) and so prescribed the deliberate control of fertility, which meant limiting offspring through "natural" methods of extinguishing passion, such as the abstention from meat, spices, coffee, and tea. In the introduction to his 1854 *Fruits and Farinacea the Proper Food of Man*, he wrote: "Sacred and profane authors unite in representing the progenitors of our race as frugivorous. At a subsequent period, they are stated to have fed upon plants of a more herbaceous character; and at a still later period, they are recorded as having become 'riotous eaters of the flesh' of other animals. These periods are also characterized by different states of innocence, virtue, justice and happiness; and correspond to the golden, silver, brazen, and iron ages of the poets." Trall was the creator of Graham crackers (made with Sylvester Graham's "Graham flour") sometime in the 1850s, when he began serving them to his institute's patients and visitors.

Dr. James Caleb Jackson (1811-1895) took over the "Our Home Hygienic Institute" at Dansville, New York, in 1858, a center for the administration of the hydropathic regimen. Jackson did not allow red meat at the spa, or tea, coffee, alcohol, or tobacco, and emphasized fruits, vegetables, and unprocessed grains on its menu. In 1875 he published *Christ as a Physician*, arguing that controlling the appetite and passions would make the person more spiritual. At the spa, he invented the first dry, whole grain breakfast cereal, which he called "Granula." It was a mix of Graham flour and water baked in brick ovens, then broken up into bean-sized bits, and baked again and then broken up into smaller bits. Inconveniently, they had to be soaked in water or milk for a considerable time (typically overnight) in order to be soft enough to eat. Jackson created the "Our Home Granula Company" and sold his cereal by mail order.

⁶ Graham's enthusiasm for regular exercise was shared by Diocletian ("Dio") Lewis, whose writings and example of setting up a gymnastics academy in Boston, was largely responsible for introducing gym classes into the public schools.

Ellen Gould White (1827-1915), the Seventh-day Adventist prophetess, had a vision in 1863 in which the relation of physical health to spiritual health, the body to the spirit, was revealed to her. She visited Dr. Jackson's institute in New York, was duly impressed by it, and then set up the Western Health Reform Institute in Battle Creek, Michigan (which became the world center for Seventh-day Adventism). She published the pamphlet, *Health, or How to Live*, in which she advised her readers not to trust the appetite, which has become perverted, or the dietary customs of society. She counseled eating grains, nuts, fruit, and whole-grain flour.

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943) was a follower of Ellen White from Battle Creek. He studied medicine in New York City, where he conceived of revolutionizing "the breakfast food idea" after growing weary of preparing his own daily breakfasts of seven graham crackers and an apple.⁷ When he finished medical school and came back to Battle Creek to direct the Adventist health sanitarium there, he created a ready-made breakfast food for his patients, inventing Granola, a product that was modeled after Dr. Jackson's Granula. Dr. Kellogg eventually separated himself from the Adventists, partly because of monetary disputes over the profits from the sanitarium and partly because of doctrinal disputes stimulated by the Adventists' estimation that he had become a Pantheist. In response, Kellogg opened up his own sanitarium in Battle Creek. It very quickly outpaced the Adventists' institution.

In 1894, in order to "replace the half-cooked, pasty, dyspepsia-producing breakfast mush," Dr. Kellogg and his younger brother William Keith Kellogg (1860-1951) developed a method of toasting and flaking cooked wheat kernels, producing a breakfast food cereal they called "Granose."

Henry Drushel Perky (1843-1906) was a dyspeptic who studied and practiced law in Nebraska and was a member of the State Senate. He moved to Colorado for his health in 1880, where he was a lawyer for the Union Pacific Railroad, and then a partner in a steel railroad car manufacturing company. He came to believe that, "The evil in man cannot be legislated out of him, but it can be fed out of him," and opened a vegetarian restaurant in Denver. In 1892, he developed "little whole wheat mattresses," Shredded Wheat. To manufacture it, he founded the Cereal Machine Company, which he would eventually move to Niagara Falls. His mission was to provide food to the human body so that Man would revert to his "natural

⁷ The saga of the Kellogg brothers and of C. W. Post is well treated in Gerald Carson, *Cornflake Crusade* (New York: Rinehart, 1957) and in Horace B. Powell, *The Original Has This Signature—W. K. Kellogg* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956). Dr. Kellogg himself left a mass of writing. Of particular relevance to the subject of this essay, see his *The Itinerary of a Breakfast; a popular account of the travels of a breakfast through the food tube and of the ten gates and stations through which it passes, also of the obstacles which it sometimes meets* (Battle Creek: Modern Medicine Publishing Company, 1918); *The Battle Creek Sanitarium System: History, Organization, Methods* (Battle Creek: Gage Printing Company, 1908); and any of the many editions of his *Home-book of Modern Medicine*.

condition." Dr. Kellogg visited Denver in 1894, and Perky showed him his method of shredding wheat.

After marketing the wheat-based product, Granose, Will Kellogg then turned to corn, having bought up and perfected the manufacturing rights and machinery of the Korn Krisp Company of Kalamazoo, which had begun producing a product it called "Frumenta," a corn flake which, unfortunately, in its original form, had been "brittle, with edges so sharp that care had to be exercised in eating it." In 1898, the Kellogg brothers founded the Sanitas Food Company, to sell health food, such as breakfast cereal, pancake flour, and Dr. Kellogg's invention—peanut butter—via mail order.⁸

The Kellogg brothers had a falling-out and dissolved their financial connections. Will got the corn flakes company, and succeeded wildly with it. In 1906, he established the Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flakes Company. John used the proceeds from his sanitarium and food products to publish his widely-circulated *Good Health* journal and to create in 1911 the influential Race Betterment Foundation, in order to prepare the way for a super race of "new men," and to set up a "eugenic registry" that evaluated couples for breeding based on their genetic pedigrees in order to stop the propagation of "defectives." His Battle Creek Food Company continued to manufacture and sell Bran Fig Cereal, Rice Flake, Wheat Germ Flakes, brewers' yeast tablets, gluten flour, Malted Nuts, Minute Brew, Savita, Nuttose, Protose, soy flour, and vegetable steaks.

Charles William Post (1854-1914) was a Midwestern inventor and salesman of agricultural equipment, who went to Dr. Kellogg's sanitarium as a patient, after suffering a series of nervous breakdowns, but then became interested in making breakfast food himself. He was guided in his quest by his study of the literature of the nascent Mind Cure movement. He set up his own health spa in Battle Creek, the LaVita Inn. In 1895, he founded the Postum Cereal Company there, manufacturing the sole product of Postum, a coffee replacement made from wheat and molasses, the idea for which he probably got from a similar product made by Dr. Kellogg. In 1897, he also developed Grape-Nuts, a breakfast cereal made from wheat that had a nutty flavor and, as a sweetener, used malt dextrose, which was commonly known as grape sugar. Post was a consummate master of advertising and proselytized his ideas of curing human woe through diet reform, along with his products. Each package of Grape-Nuts came with a kind of religious tract, *The Road to Wellville*, on how to gain a healthy body and spirit.

Post's wheat-based cereal flakes, which he first marketed in 1908, were called "Elijah's Manna," but when people objected on religious grounds, he changed their name to Post Toasties.

⁸ John Harvey Kellogg patented "A Process for Preparing Nut Meal" in 1895. Kellogg liked to boil his nuts (including peanuts) before milling or grinding them, however, rather than roasting them.

Business partners Henry D. Seymour and William Heston of Ravenna, Ohio, registered the Quaker Man as a trademark in 1877—the first trademark registered for a breakfast cereal. They made Quaker Oats, steel-cut oats packaged in two-pound paper boxes with cooking directions on the outside, an innovation for the time. The name "Quaker Oats" would seem to tie the product to the owners' religious views, but Seymour said he chose it simply because he found an encyclopedia article on Quakers and decided that the qualities described there—integrity, honesty, and purity—were ones he wanted to link to his company's product. Heston credited himself with the name, saying that while walking on the streets of Cincinnati, he had seen a picture of William Penn, whose clothes and character inspired him to choose the name. Either way, it could not have hurt to conjure the figure of a religious Nonconformist, waving a scroll inscribed "Pure," on the package of a breakfast cereal. At the time, potential customers would have associated it with the other Progressive health food items, especially wholegrain breakfast foods, that were being urged by food reformers descended from Protestant Nonconformists and Inner Light advocates. In 1904, the American Cereal Company, which then made Quaker Oats, set up a plant in Battle Creek in order to take advantage of the manufacturing economies in producing cereal there—not only the grain mills and the railroad connections, but the cardboard and paper mills there—which had been developed by Kellogg and Post.

Like Quaker Oats, Wheaties was not developed out of the religious conviction of its inventors, but ensconced itself in a market that had already been largely influenced by such convictions. In 1921, a clinician (alas, his name is lost in the mists of history) at a Minneapolis health clinic accidentally spilled some cooking wheat bran gruel onto the top of a stove. When the heat dried bits of it, he thought it had become a candidate for a marketable breakfast cereal product. He took the idea to the Washburn Crosby Company (at the time, the producers of Gold Medal Flour), whose head miller, George Cormack, perfected the product, which was first introduced in 1924, under the unwieldy name "Washburn's Gold Medal Whole Wheat Flakes." Although its originators had no direct religious motivations, the aura surrounding other breakfast cereal products, which treated cereals as an instrument for regenerating a "New Man," would seem to have made possible the company's extraordinary metaphorical claims about Wheaties' ability to endow the body with strength and vitality ("Breakfast of Champions"), and to linking its marketing to an array of athletic superstars.

A reconnaissance of the landscape of mid- to late-nineteenth century health food reform ideas in America that made breakfast cereal a success must also notice two popular movements of the time that were re-fashioning popular ideas of health and nutrition: homeopathy—the "alternative" medical system initiated by Samuel Hahnemann in 1796, based upon the alchemically-inspired principle that "Like cures like—and "Thomsonian" treatments, a set of principles and prescriptions confected by the self-taught rustic Samuel Thomson (1769-1843) and made popular by his 1822 *New Guide to Health*.

Both systems were eccentric and quackish. And both became popular in America partly because their devotees regarded them as challenges to conventional medicine, with its system of licensure, which was criticized as an anti-republican cabal, enforced by a self-serving elite of practitioners. Radical egalitarians could hardly fail to be susceptible to an argument that assailed the regular medical profession as hierarchical and oppressive of the natural and spontaneous wisdom of the common folk, and of women in particular, it seems, for there were very few of them to be found as licensed physicians. They were more often to be found inhabiting the marginal regions of midwifery, or dispensing homemade herbal and “natural” folk remedies. Both homeopathy and Thomsonism fostered a kind of medical Nonconformism, opposed to the dominant “priestcraft” of organized medical authority. They both assumed that the truth was occulted behind the false systems that obscured nature and spirit. Both relied heavily on folk wisdom, popular sovereignty, and the rightness of the revelations of the individual.

Although homeopathy (like phrenology) achieved a far greater external organization than Thomsonism did, by setting up schools, clinics, hospitals, professional organizations, and journals, Thomsonism’s loosely formulated notions arguably had a greater influence on nutritional ideas and practices in nineteenth-century America. In particular, Thomson’s notion that “no mineral can be a medicine” led to the widespread conviction that vegetables and herbs were far superior as vivifying agents and in healing disease than any merely chemical preparation (Thomson himself ran a large mail-order business of herbal preparations that he would prescribe himself). Thus was born the solicitude that Thomsonians felt for what we would call today “organic food” and “natural” medicines. The Thomsonian anti-mineral ire was particularly directed against the regular (or allopathic) physicians’ reliance on the administration of calomel (mercury chloride) as a purgative. Other previously-Progressive treatments also retreated from the medical practice of the time in the face of the Thomsonians’ attacks, notably bloodletting, by cupping or by leeching.⁹

Thomson conceived a fear of upsetting the body’s blood supply. According to him, most diseases were ultimately the result of cold acting on the body, and so it was important to him to preserve the volume and integrity of the blood, which served as the body’s reservoir of heat. This notion led him to recommend a diet that stimulated “heat,” and so included, for example, a heavy reliance on cayenne pepper as well as other vegetal stimulants. It also led him to abhor anything that “weakened” or “degenerated” the blood. From this notion of maintaining the strength and purity of the blood, nineteenth-century Progressives would consume bottle after bottle of herbal elixirs that promised to revivify and purify their blood, and it also led them—abolitionists though they might have been—to become racialists, to worry about miscegenation, the mixing of the blood of “pure” races

⁹ Bloodletting and calomel were favored by late-eighteenth-century Progressive American physician Benjamin Rush.

with that of “lesser” ones, and ultimately to vehemently oppose the practice of vaccination because the injected serum was derived from the blood of beasts.

Finally, nineteenth-century health reformers were often influenced by the notion that, as Swedenborg was convinced, human physiology, both in general and in particular, was a counterpart to a spiritual and moral reality. This was important, not only for the principles and practice of phrenology, but also for reformers’ assumptions about human evolution. In those years before genetics was understood, there were many reformers who took the Doctrine of Signatures so seriously that they believed that a pregnant woman who even beheld an immoral, ugly, violent, or criminal act would be likely to imprint that sight onto the fetus and that the baby would be born physically marked by it—it would be ugly, for example, or have a birth mark in the shape of a weapon—or spiritually marked by it and would grow up much more likely to be immoral, violent, or criminal.

Battle Creek: Power Spot of the New Age

The usual understanding of why Battle Creek, Michigan blossomed into a center for health food reformers at the turn of the twentieth century traces the story to the Adventist health institute there (a small baker in Battle Creek, Joseph Smith, had been catering to the Health Institute’s clientele as early as 1880, producing rolled oats, graham biscuits, and baked goods made with gluten flour) and to the subsequent establishment of Dr. Kellogg’s sanitarium, and the consequent “cereal boom” in breakfast and health foods that lasted from about 1895 to about 1910, when the huge number of start-up companies and imitators of Kellogg and Post had shaken out into a much smaller group.

But Adventists felt comfortable establishing themselves in Battle Creek because it was already permeated by an air that welcomed religious nonconformists, who, in mid-nineteenth century America, clustered around a set of radical reforms—the abolition of slavery, woman’s rights, radical egalitarianism, religious Free Thought, utopian socialism, spiritualism, Free Love, and (more to the point here) medical and health reform, including the prohibition of alcohol and tobacco, as well as the beginnings of the Mind Cure or Mental Science movement. So why was it that, as soon as Kellogg and Post began pushing out their new-fangled millennial manna from Battle Creek, the town suddenly exploded, not only with genuine industrial entrepreneurs, but also with sheer hustlers, cranks, prophets, cultists, and con men, out for the main chance?¹⁰

It was not just the opportunity afforded by the Kalamazoo River to set up mills there to process the grain that the mechanization of farming on the Great Plains was beginning to make possible. Battle Creek achieved its fame as a center for radical innovations in health reform because it became an early home of religious innovators who were interested in such a reform.

¹⁰ Brian C. Wilson, “The Battle for Battle Creek: Sectarian Competition in the Yankee West,” *Quaker Theology* 23 (Summer/Fall 2013).

It was settled when the Erie Canal poured out a huge number of dissatisfied New Englanders, and especially migrants from the Burnt-Over district in upper New York State, into the Great Lakes region. Unsurprisingly, they included clusters of religious nonconformists who sought to establish their own communities. Among them were groups formed out of the “Hicksite separation,” of Quakers, who had followed the lead of Elias Hicks and opted for the most radical aspects of nonconformism and reliance on the “Inner Light” doctrine and who formed the backbone of most of the radical, Progressive reform movements of the time, which held gatherings under the name of the “Progressive Friends” or the “Friends of Universal Progress.” Hicksite Quakers and Universalists were fellow travellers in these movements.

The early settlement of Battle Creek was so shaped by the influx of Quakers that it resembled a Quaker colony, with the Hicksites creating a Monthly Meeting there as early as 1834. The Meeting eventually affiliated with the Progressive Friends, but an allegiance to particular organizations was unsurprisingly weak among them and the Battle Creek group appears to have shared members with the Universalist society founded there by minister Justin Parsons Averill, who had moved west from Vermont. When the Universalists chastised Averill for his conversion to Spiritualism in 1856, he affiliated with the Progressive Friends.¹¹ The Friends in Battle Creek also shared members, as it were, with the Swedenborgians, whose ranks had swelled through the missionizing efforts of George Field, after he gave a series of lectures in Battle Creek in 1842 and began to use the town as the center of his proselytizing campaign.

The Battle Creek Hicksites, including such town pioneers as Elias C. Manchester (a partner with Justin Averill in a grocery business and the owner of a downtown Battle Creek racetrack and fair grounds) and Reynolds and Dorcas Cornell were early and fervent converts to Spiritualism, very soon after the Fox sisters began their rappings in 1848, and the Cornells organized séances in the town. Their son Hiram also eagerly converted and founded a Harmonial Institute in nearby Bedford in 1851, and then incorporated a settlement about six miles outside Battle Creek in 1855, which was called “Harmonia,” where “a liberal progressive class of minds”—read “radical Spiritualists” here—settled in plots and hosted extended visitations of well-known Spiritualist lecturers such as Nathaniel Tallmadge, Warren Chase, and Sojourner Truth. Battle Creek was where Lois Waisbrooker published the Spiritualist newspaper *Our Age* from 1873-74, and nearby Kalamazoo was the source of Spiritualist Dorus Fox’s *Present Age* from 1868-72 and Moses Hull’s *Progressive Age* from 1864-65.

It was to the 1857 Michigan Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends, which had been held in Battle Creek at least since 1854, that Andrew Jackson Davis spoke, and it was the assembly at that meeting which provoked his fellow speaker, abolitionist Parker

¹¹ On Averill, see John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2004), 96-97.

Pillsbury, to complain in a letter to *The Liberator* that “numerically the Spiritualists predominated,” and that the abolitionist cause in the State had been “infested like potato-rot” with “a morbid, mawkish Spiritualism.”¹²

By 1860, the Progressionists in Battle Creek had renamed themselves the Free Church of Battle Creek, and in 1870 changed their name again to the First Society of Spiritualists of Battle Creek. The group was still quite active there through the “cereal boom” and beyond.

To complete the description of why Battle Creek became what Marc Demarest calls a “strange attractor” of Victorian-era psychics, spiritualists, and health reformers, it is necessary to recall one more resident of the town, James Martin Peebles, who first moved there after having been rebuffed by the Universalists over which he had ministered in the East, and after having read with sympathy an account of Justin Averill’s similar troubles, presiding over his congregation in Battle Creek, turning them to the new dispensation of Spiritualism. For fifty years, into his old age, Peebles resided in Battle Creek, using it as a center for his many lecture tours on behalf of Free Thought, Free Religion, and—increasingly, as the years went by—“Dr.” Peebles’ formula for living a long and healthy life, based on the principles of vegetarianism, sexual “purity,” and the positive thinking preached by the New Thought movement, centered at the “Peebles Institute of Medicine.” Theosophists also knew him well as an early associate of the founders of Theosophy and the author of books that sought to harmonize the different world religions.¹³

“Great is GLAME and Edgerly is its Prophet”¹⁴

This brings us to “the cereal from Checkerboard Square.” William Henry Danforth (1870-1956) was the part owner of a grain mill and feed-store in St. Louis, who mixed cracked corn, rolled oats, and molasses on the floor in a backroom of the store in 1894 and bagged the mixture of horse and mule feed into sacks and sold it under the name of “Purina.” A hurricane leveled his mill in 1896, and he was forced to rebuild. On a buying trip to Kansas, Danforth met a miller who had figured out a way to prevent whole wheat, including the germ, from spoiling, and, convinced on Grahamite principles that it would appeal to the (human) health food community, Danforth began packing and selling the miller’s product as Purina Whole Wheat Cereal in 1898.

¹² “Progress of Disunionism at the West,” *Liberator*, October 23, 1857.

¹³ A hagiography of Peebles, written by his friend and fellow Spiritualist, Joseph Osgood Barrett is *Spiritual Pilgrim: A Biography of James M. Peebles* (Boston: William White and Company, 1871). Another is Edward Whipple, *A Biography of James M. Peebles, M.D., A.M.* (Battle Creek: E. Whipple, 1901). Peebles spent his last years in Los Angeles.

¹⁴ The last sentence in Kate Swan’s article (*infra.*) about Edgerly’s Ralston Health Club.

Danforth then contacted "Dr. Everett Ralston," the health-food-reformer-of-the-moment, who had organized the Ralston Health Club with thousands of members. To Danforth, the organization seemed to be a perfect vehicle, either for trying out his health cereal product, or simply an audience of committed purchasers of such a product. He therefore secured "Dr. Ralston's" endorsement of Purina Wheat, which was given on the condition that the product itself would have the name "Ralston" attached to it—Ralston-Purina. Danforth's cereal became Ralston Health Club Breakfast Food, then Ralston Purina Wheat, then Instant Ralston. The endorsement increased Danforth's sales so much that he changed his company's name to the Ralston-Purina Company. But this endorsement agreement—and, presumably some arrangement to share the membership list of the Ralston Health Club with Danforth's company—may have been the sole point of actual contact that "Dr. Ralston" had with Danforth.

Danforth himself, the real mover at the center of what became the Ralston-Purina Company commercial empire, advocated a proto-New Age, positive-mind-over-matter approach to life, which also combined elements of "Muscular Christianity," New Thought, and the Social Gospel, summed up in his "four square" philosophy (not connected with Aimee Semple McPherson's "Foursquare Church"), which inspired his company's checkerboard logo (Physical, Mental, Social, and Religious). "I dare you to develop a magnetic personality," he wrote in his book, *I Dare You!* Like C. W. Post, Danforth had a gift for proselytizing the gospel of health and promoting his products. Also, like Post, Danforth distributed pamphlets and tracts to his customers. The Purina Mills ("Where Purity is Paramount") in 1902, for example, sent out copies of the straightforward inspirational "Why Some Men Fail" by Lorin F. Deland and "'Get Out or Get in Line" by Elbert Hubbard," but also (more interestingly) "Mary and John in the Home" by marriage and sex reformer Alice B. Stockham.¹⁵ The Ralston Purina Company opened a cereal plant in Battle Creek in 1927 and manufactured the little squares of Wheat Chex there (and, eventually, Rice Chex, Corn Chex, and Ralston Corn Flakes).

So now we bring to center stage the real subject of this essay, the mysterious "Dr. Ralston," who, perhaps, never even visited Battle Creek. Who was he?

His real name was Albert Webster Edgerly. He was born in Salem, Massachusetts on December 20, 1852, where his father, John Foss Edgerly, was a factory overseer.¹⁶ By 1864, the Edgerlys moved to Lynn, where the father opened a dry goods and

¹⁵ Advertisement for Purina Mills in the *Christian Herald*, August 1902.

¹⁶ Census, birth records, and city directories show that John Foss Edgerly was born in Alton Bay, New Hampshire, November 29, 1826. He died in Lynn, Massachusetts on October 14, 1919, and was interred in the Pine Grove Cemetery there. He married Rhoda ("Lottie") Lucinda Stone, who was born in Boston on May 9, 1827. While living in Salem, John and Lucinda had four children: Luella Vesta (born in 1851), Albert Webster (1852), Ida Augusta (1857), and Lizzie Etta (1859).

furniture store.¹⁷ Young Webster Edgerly went to school there and graduated from Lynn High School in 1867. After graduation, he found work as a bookkeeper in Lynn and developed an interest in oratory and theatrics, which he demonstrated by addressing gatherings of his high school alumnae in the first few years after they had graduated.¹⁸

During the nineteenth century, the city of Lynn was the home of a large number of societies made up of members in voluntary association for mutual, educational uplift and social betterment, such as the Young Men's Debating Society, the Exploring Circle, the Gnomologian Society, the Franklin Club, the Natural History Society, and others. Among these was the Everett Debating Society, formed in June 1871, whose membership ("the Everetts") was open to all men who were high school graduates.¹⁹ Albert Webster Edgerly was one of the founding members and, beginning in 1874, briefly edited its publication, the *Everett Monthly*, which was widely distributed for a year or so and which consisted, after the first year, mainly of contributions of the Lynn Exploring Circle, a longstanding group of men devoted to studying the biology, geology, and scenic features of the area, issuing a detailed description, for example, of Dungeon Rock and the general area around High Rock in 1858. The Everett Debating Society lasted about fifteen years, often hosting the public to performances of oratory, elocution, music, and drama. Its debating sessions were heavy on audience appeal, such as when it discussed the question "as to which is the madder—the husband who goes home and finds that dinner is not ready or the wife who has dinner ready but whose husband doesn't go home? (A draw.)"

Edgerly then enrolled in the study of law at the newly-established program at Boston University and graduated in 1876 among its first class of recipients of the Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.).²⁰ In July of that year, he was admitted to the practice of law in Middlesex and Suffolk counties. He decided to set up an office then in Boston, although he continued to live in Lynn.

¹⁷ Lynn, Massachusetts, the other great proto-New Age power spot in America during the nineteenth century, was a favored spot for tapping into spiritual inspiration, for example, for such spiritualists as Andrew Jackson Davis and John Murray Spear.

¹⁸ As, for example, Albert W. Edgerly, *Progression Backward: An oration spoken by a high school graduate on graduation day in the So. Com. M.E. Church on May 21, 1870*.

¹⁹ "The Everett Debating Society," *Register of the Lynn Historical Society* 12 (1903): 85-91; John J. Mangan, "The Newspapers of Lynn," *Register of the Lynn Historical Society* 13 (1908): 168; David Newhall Johnson, *Sketches of Lynn; or, the Changes of Fifty Years* (Lynn: Thomas Nichols, 1880), 234-255.

²⁰ *Historical Register of Boston University, 1869-1891* (Boston: University Offices, 1891), 48.

On October 15, 1877, he married eighteen-year-old Ella F. Glines. She was from Lynn, the daughter of James and Josie R. Glines. Her father was a shoemaker, and the newlywed couple moved in with the bride's family.

At this point in Edgerly's life, things began to go publicly awry. From later newspaper reports, it appears that young lawyer Edgerly began to entertain thoughts of divorce about a month after he and Ella had tied the knot. The couple's relations became fractious enough to have resulted in a bit of newspaper copy that local editors around the country picked up as an item: "Albert W. Edgerly, a lawyer of Lynn, Mass., forbade his wife to go to a circus. She went and on her return found the doors locked against her. He refuses to live with her, although their previous eight months of married life was felicitous."²¹ Probably not felicitous in reality, but saying that it was made for better newspaper copy. Nevertheless, after that incident the couple appears to have patched things up for a while—or, at least, their battles disappeared from the newspapers.

Then, in 1880, Albert filed for divorce from Ella and the testimony brought them both into the daily journals and scandal sheets. Albert accused Ella of adultery "at various times" in Lynn and Boston.²² To substantiate his claim, he had engaged an "investigator" to track Ella's activities, by which Albert was able to surprise her with her dress off in a boarding house in Boston in the presence of a man. Ella denied the claim of adultery and, when she filed a counter-suit, produced witnesses that Albert had constructed an elaborate conspiracy—engaging the boarding-house room himself, suggesting to a group of Ella friends to bring her there, drugging a glass of liquid refreshment, having an accomplice remove her dress (although not her underthings), forcing his way into the room to catch her in dishabille, and even attempting to bribe the boarding house owner into leaving town during the divorce hearing so that he would be unavailable to give testimony.

On the face of it, Ella's tale of an elaborate conspiratorial plot would perhaps have seemed incredible, except for her witnesses. But there were other things militating against Albert's story. For one thing, from the beginning of his law practice, he had been in the newspapers more than once for shady dealings with his clients—in particular, there were accusations of bribery and fraud. Public sentiment therefore was hardly disposed in his favor. In addition, testimony in the divorce hearing strongly suggested that he had already had an adulterous relationship with another woman from Lynn, named Cora Estella Burchstead.

Whoever was at fault, the divorce was granted, and in fact, Albert did marry Cora Burchstead in February 1883. However, Albert's unethical legal practices had multiplied by that time, including "his professional misconduct while counsel in a

²¹ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, June 19, 1878, and elsewhere.

²² "Lynn's Sensation; the Edgerly Scandal and Its History," *Boston Daily Globe*, February 23, 1880; "The Edgerly Divorce Suit," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 11, 1881; "Edgerly Divorce Suit," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 13, 1881; "Edgerly vs. Edgerly," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 13, 1881.

noted divorce case”—perhaps, bribing witnesses—and a hearing was scheduled for his disbarment in mid-1883, just before which he decamped to Kansas, perhaps with Cora in tow.²³

Very soon afterwards, lawyer Edgerly, now preferring to go by his middle name, Webster, found employment in Burlington, Kansas, as the County Attorney of Coffey County. It was not long, however, before his legal activities got him into trouble in Kansas as well, and charges were filed for his disbarment in Kansas for accepting bribes, compounding felony, and blackmail. Edgerly evidently believed in a strong offense as a pre-emptive defense, for he filed a petition against the county's probate judge, arguing that the judge had neglected his duty of properly registering probate taxes.²⁴ In March 1886, Webster Edgerly, “in trouble again,” as the newspapers reported, disappeared from Kansas.

In 1886, one of Edgerly's younger sisters, Lizzie, married Francis Galatin Martyn, also originally from Lynn. Martyn, it was reported, had spent twenty years in India and had made a fortune there in the shipping business.²⁵ When he returned to America, he founded a business school in Washington, D.C.—the Martyn Commercial College. After marrying Lizzie Edgerly, he and his new bride settled in the nation's capital, where he headed the college and taught there.

With his sister and brother-in-law resident in Washington, Albert Webster Edgerly reappeared in public view. Having ended his career in the practice (or rather malpractice) of the law, he now took up his long-time fascination with oratory, elocution, debating, and drama. In 1887, he surfaced in Washington, succeeding in

²³ The wedding with Cora was in Lynn on February 28, 1883. Cora became pregnant with Albert's child and travelled back to her family in Lynn to give birth to Florence Marion Edgerly on February 24, 1884. Florence's own later marriage notice perhaps gives evidence that she did not know much about her birth parents, that is, that her parents did not raise her, for the register (in Lynn) noting her marriage to a farmer from New Hampshire—which presumably relied on Florence's own information about her birth parents—listed her father as Albert W. Edgerly, age 28 (dead), white, lawyer, and his birthplace as Birmingham, England. On the immediate case leading to the move to disbar him, see “Edgerly Again,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 4, 1892.

²⁴ The State, ex rel., A.W. Edgerly, County Attorney of Coffey county, State of Kansas, v. C[harles] O. Brown, Probate Judge of Coffey county, 1886, Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas, vol. 35, p. v. Judgment for defendant; see also, “Edgerly in Trouble Again,” *Boston Daily Globe*, December 31, 1878, and “A Scoundrelly Counselor,” *Weekly Auburnian* (Auburn, NY), March 26, 1886.

²⁵ According to his obituary, “Francis G. Martyn Dead,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 1891. He was a member of the Washington Lodge of Scottish Rite Masonry, and so was his brother-in-law, Webster Edgerly. Martyn was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery in Lynn.

establishing himself by 1889 as the head of the “Martyn College of Elocution and Oratory” in Washington, presumably upon the foundation, finances, and good offices of his brother-in-law’s institution at another address in the city. Edgerly “founded” three variations on his college—locating one as indistinguishable from his brother-in-law’s commercial college, another one (also in Washington) as a “University of Expression,” and a third, in Baltimore, the “Shaftesbury College of Expression,” from about 1889, under the direction of Alice May Youse.²⁶

During this time he used the name Webster Edgerly, but also adopted the more Thespian-sounding cognomen of “Edmund Shaftesbury.” The name, it was later said, was one he had invented earlier in his life:

Edmund Shaftesbury is a pseudonym, being his maternal ancestral name as to the final part and also ancestral name as to the first part. The way the name Edmund Shaftesbury came about is this. When 15 years of age and in high school, he published some uncopyrighted books, of the success of which he was uncertain and he felt sensitive about being shown in case of failure; hence he took two of his English ancestral names, making the pseudonym.²⁷

Under this name, he began writing and publishing books on oratory, voice training, and acting, with a heavy emphasis on an American interpretation of the work of François Delsarte, which included physical exercises and learning a regimen of histrionic postures and tones that were supposed to be intrinsically linked to and expressive of virtues, vices, moods, and states of mind—a sort of theatrical Doctrine of Signatures or phrenological approach to acting.²⁸ This probable misreading of Delsarte’s more nuanced teaching was becoming popular in the theater and among public orators.

In 1891 “Professor” Edgerly (he was now claiming a Master’s degree and a Ph.D. after his name) laid siege to the hand of one of his pupils, eighteen-year-old Edna Reed Boyts, the daughter of the wealthy owner of an iron foundry in Connellsville,

²⁶ Youse (1863-1938) was an elocutionist, “physical culturalist,” poet, and song composer who would eventually appear in three silent films—*Beyond the Winds* (1916), *Fires of Rebellion* (1917), and *Her Soul’s Inspiration* (1918). She published *The Power of Prayer; a musical poem, narrating a true incident in the Civil War* (1901), illustrated with photos of her gesturing the sentiments of the poem. One of her young students at the Baltimore Shaftesbury school was Dorothy Phillips (real name, Dorothy Strible), who would become a fairly well-known silent screen actress.

²⁷ *Bakersfield Californian*, June 7, 1928. Perhaps his mother’s ancestor had come from Shaftesbury in Dorset.

²⁸ Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 89-93, assesses Edgerly’s crypto-Delsartean vocal codes in light of the turn-of-the-century’s notions of oratory.

Pennsylvania, and this time he was successful in plighting his troth. They were married in a ceremony in her hometown on July 5, 1892.²⁹

Before leaving Webster Edgerly's nuptial history, however, two other women might be mentioned with whom he was linked during his somewhat obscure wanderings in the Midwest. The first was a Mrs. Harriet E. Scott-Saxton, an elocution teacher who had graduated from the Shoemaker School of Elocution in Philadelphia and who had set up a rather successful school of her own in Louisville, Kentucky in the late 1870s and early 1880s. In 1883, she moved to Denver, where she reconstituted her school, where it became a popular and well-regarded fixture of public life in the city through the 1890s, and where she became a local leader for progressive reforms such as temperance and woman's suffrage, as well as active in sponsoring a "Congress of Truth" in Denver modeled on the Chicago Parliament of Religions and a proponent of a projected utopian community near Denver called "New Era."³⁰

The newspapers reported that Edgerly "had a wife living from whom he had not been divorced, but who, under the name of Mrs. Scott Saxton, conducted a college of oratory ... [in] Denver, and that a monthly remittance purchased her silence."

In addition, to confuse things further, Edgerly's nuptial history again raised its head in the newspapers in 1896, when Mary A. Davidson, a con artist originally from Lynn, eventually made her way to San Francisco where she exploded into the headlines in the California papers for an attempt to blackmail a local Presbyterian minister. The background reporting on Davidson's past said that Edgerly had "married Cora Davidson, [the adopted] daughter of the woman held in San Francisco." After divorcing her, the papers said, he later "resumed his relationship with his mother-in-law, and was associated with her up to the tune of her leaving

²⁹ The Edgerlys would have two children—Gladys Cecilia and Beatrice Edna. Both girls eventually attended the Corcoran School of Art in Washington. Gladys married landscape painter Earl Kenneth Bates and became a talented sculptor, with several of her pieces in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Beatrice concentrated on painting.

³⁰ I can find nothing of Mrs. Scott Saxton's life before she began advertising in the Louisville papers in 1879, declaring herself a graduate of the National School of Oratory in Philadelphia; later retrospective notices of her career in Denver also have nothing on her early life. "Edgerly Anxiously Awaited," *Washington Times*, August 14, 1894 and "Professor Edgerly Takes Exception to an Article Which Appeared in the News," *Washington Post*, August 18, 1894. Oddly, it seems, the ad for the Scott Saxton College of Elocution and Dramatic Art ("Mrs. Scott Saxton, Principal") in *Werner's Directory of Elocutionists, Readers, Lecturers and Other Public Instructors and Entertainers* for 1887 lists, among other faculty members, a "Mrs. C. R. Burchard, Literature." Mrs. Scott-Saxton's leanings toward Theosophy are suggested by her role in organizing the "Congress of Truth" in Denver; in fact, she was a member of the Universal Brotherhood of Luxor, Lodge No. 104 in Denver.

Chicago for San Francisco.”³¹ Was “Cora Davidson” in fact Cora Burchstead going by the name of an adoptive mother from Lynn, a woman to whom the banks had advanced mortgages on the pianos in her shop and who then sold them anyway and left the city with the money before being apprehended, convicted and sent to prison for more than three years?³² Edgerly had already made an attempt the year before, when the charge had first appeared in the papers that Mrs. Scott-Saxton was his secret wife, to explain his marital career:

He declared that he had never seen the Denver woman and knew of her only through advertisements of her business. ... he explained that he had only been married three times. His first marriage was not “according to the law of God,” but it was a legal one, and after a hard fight he secured a divorce on the ground of adultery. His second marriage also turned out badly. He could have procured a divorce in this case also on statutory grounds, but preferred not to figure as complainant in another divorce suit. Finally, at the solicitation of his then wife and her friends, he permitted her to begin suit on her own account. She did so and a divorce was the result.³³

So, there are hints that Edgerly’s time in Kansas and the Midwest had not been occupied solely with his law practice, such as it was. Not only did he appear on the scene in Washington in 1887 with a fully-developed persona of a learned and practiced teacher and theorist of elocution and acting, with the “stage name,” one might say, of Edmund Shaftesbury, but he had been busy in another direction as well, under another name, and he brought that persona to Washington as well. It is under that name that his story crosses that of the cereal makers of Battle Creek.

Amid the waving grain fields of the Great Plains, he had adopted the mantle of a self-appointed health expert and styled himself “Dr. Everett Ralston.” For the name Everett, according to the mythopeic account that he later authored, we are to look back to the “Everetts” of the 1870s, who he described as a sort of earnest secret brotherhood of scientific investigators, but who we can without much difficulty recognize as his imaginative rendering of the old Everett Debating Society in Lynn and the collection of amateur naturalists, the Lynn Exploring Circle, whose rambling musings the “Everetts” published. Mystification being called for by Edgerly to meet the need of recruiting followers, he created an imaginary history of “Ralstonism” that cast back into the mists of the distant past to limn its origins. In the vaguest of ways he referred to the dawn of its beginning as far back as 1801, when a future “Ralstonite” first noted in his journal that he should attend to his health.³⁴

³¹ “Edgerly and His Elixir,” *San Francisco Call*, February 24, 1896.

³² “Her Eastern Record; Sent to a House of Correction for a Period of Thirty-Seven Months,” *San Francisco Call*, December 31, 1895.

³³ “Libel Suit Against the News,” *Washington Times*, September 30, 1894.

³⁴ *Book of Star Ralstonism: Book of General Membership of the Ralston Health Club* (Washington, D.C., 1900), 14-15.

As for the name “Ralston,” he was even less forthcoming, although he seemed to suggest that it was an acronym for the principle truths of his health system. But that has the flavor of an ad hoc attempt to explain a name that he had already picked long before for another reason—or perhaps on the spur of the moment—such as, one may fancy, he might have chosen when, searching for an alias, he happened to look down at his feet and noticed that he was wearing Ralston Health Shoes, a very popular brand of footwear at the time, and which had been manufactured in Brockton, south of Boston, since 1876, the very year in which—he would later write—the Ralston Health Club was formed.

In any event, Edgerly’s interest in (and notions for marketing an expertise on) the subject of health reform need not have sprung full-blown from Edgerly’s head at the time he appeared in Kansas, but also likely had its roots (like his interests in and writings on oratory) to his youth in Lynn. The year he graduated from Lynn High School, 1876, was the year that another Lynn resident, Lydia E. Pinkham, began manufacturing and marketing her soon-to-be-famous Vegetable Compound for ladies’ ills and embarked on an advertising strategy that encouraged women to write to her with health questions that she would endeavor to answer.

By that time, Lynn had long been saturated by health reform enthusiasms. Mary Neal Gove (who would eventually marry Thomas Low Nichols), for example, had moved to Lynn in 1838 and had given public lectures on health reform there and had opened up a “female seminary” there for young women, which she ran on Grahamite principles.³⁵ During the early 1840s, a Lynn physician, Dr. Edward A. Kittredge (nicknamed “Noggs”), became converted to Dr. Trall’s water-cure philosophy and reformed his practice in the city along those lines. By the time that Webster Edgerly grew up there, Lynn’s reformist atmosphere was thoroughly infused with attention to what would today be known as “alternative medicine.” It was in Lynn that Christian Science founder Mary Baker Glover (soon Eddy) wrote *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* in 1875.

“Dr. Ralston” seems to have founded a circle of recruitment-minded health cultists when he was living in Kansas and to have placed himself at its center as an oracle on the subject of health. The circle grew in the Midwest, spawning more circles of inquirers and health faddists, who looked to him for inspiration, which he appears to have delivered to them through visiting lectures and exhortations. These cells of believers, who met together to share testimonies (and recipes, it appears), formed the “Ralston Health Club.” It certainly spread to St. Louis at this time—he was later accused in the papers of “making himself the pastor of the church of a new religion in Missouri.” There was an active network of clubs in the region during the time that William Danforth was beginning his animal feed business in St. Louis, along with two of his friends from his Presbyterian church. If the young Danforth himself

³⁵ Harriot Kezia Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses; or, Fifty Years Social, Including Twenty Years Professional Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856), 139-140.

was not actually a Ralstonite, he could scarcely have operated his grain business without encountering these new clubs.

Most of what Edgerly, as “Dr. Ralston,” advised was indeed centered on a goal that was ultimately religious: It was nothing less than the claim that death itself could be overcome, provided that one gave up unhealthful habits. Death, he said, was unnatural. It was a disease that could be banished through eliminating the accumulation of base (“osseous” in Ralston-speak) elements in the body that clogged it and made it age. Anyone who learned and applied his principles of nutrition and hygiene could extend their life indefinitely. A newspaper report later said of his activities then that he had claimed to be the first person to have produced “tangible evidence” of the immortal soul, a claim that would have been recognizable out of the mouth of a spiritualist medium specializing in “materialization.”

Throughout “Dr. Ralston’s” subsequent career as a health guru, he created organizations within organizations—each one with a seemingly specialized and esoteric teaching and goal, and each one an inducement to his followers to tread another step toward the most elusive of initiations. This was the case even at the beginning of the “Ralston Health Club,” for one of the earliest writings of Dr. Ralston describes another club, which was somehow the same as the Ralston Health Club, but somehow different. This was the Two Hundred Years Method Club—or TYM Club, “founded upon the plan of universal life.³⁶ Members were inspired by the religious enthusiasm of having been given the secret for the practical explanation for extending their lives indefinitely—two centuries was only the beginning, it seemed.

The actual regimen prescribed was somewhat less novel or revolutionary, and would have been familiar to many health reformers and faddists of the time. It included fresh air, deep breathing, and exercise. It included months-long applications of water enemas and baths. It also enjoined the drinking of distilled water, and the abstention from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, and most nuts (except almonds), and a dietetic concentration on cereals (except oats), fruits (except bananas), and vegetables. Some meat (except pork) was allowed, if it was a small amount and eaten no later than the afternoon. Dr. Ralston did recommend the ingestion of cayenne pepper, however, and even went so far as to require it as part of a truly healthy diet—a nod, it would seem, to the Thomsonians).

Ralstonism also preached the importance of control—control of the body, control of the breath, control of the diet, control of the voice, and control of sexual relations—

³⁶ His musings on this—the club’s scripture, as it were—was later set to press and published by Edgerly in 1889 as *The Book of TYM*, with a second, redacted edition in 1905, as *The Tym Club; Otherwise known as the Two Hundred Year Club, founded upon the Plan of Universal Life as Evolved in the Two-Hundred Year Method* (Washington, D.C.: Ralston Company, 1905). English-born New Thought minister (Divine Science Church) Harry Gaze also wrote and preached about unlimited lifespan and formed a short-lived (!) Two Hundred Year Club around this time.

with the aim to enhance and regulate one's "magnetism." The idea was that each person was a vessel of a universal life force, which Edgerly, for no obvious reason, named "GLAME" (nearly always rendered with all caps). In substance, it was rather like Baron von Reichenbach's Odic force famous decades before among the esoterically inclined. Edgerly did not produce an etymology for his word "Glame," which provided an opportunity for critics to poke fun at his apparently deliberate mystifications. About "GLAME, he wrote, "we could tell you many curious things about this word itself whose existence ceased from the languages of the earth many centuries before the Christian Era." Perhaps it was an item of vocabulary from Helena Blavatsky's mysterious language "Dzyan."³⁷ It was at any rate a secret, one that Ralstonites were not "allowed" to share with anyone else, although that rule was eventually loosened slightly (Thanks be to GLAME!) to allow them to discuss it with their spouses or their clergymen.

The method for obtaining GLAME had to be kept secret, for one did not cast pearls before swine. In the words of one critic, reviewing the mythologized "Everetts" who had become, in Edgerly's explanation, a sort of recrudescing Rosicrucian order:

"The Ralston Health club may, at first, be hard to understand." The history of the club, as given in the book, however, is simple as can be. It had its beginning when "four scientists agreed to demonstrate its supposed truths." One of these men was "an educated biologist. His co-laborers," says the book, "may be passed over in fewer words. One is ready with the pen and a deep student of nature's laws, a reader of thousands of books of science, an exact thinker; the other two are men of great wealth, long past middle life, of achieved public recognition, and students and thinkers of the profoundest depth. These four persons were Christian gentlemen. They were honest."

These honest Christian gentlemen had a little talk one afternoon, and one of them said the first thing that would be charged against a philanthropist who should undertake to do good to his fellow beings would be that "he had some motive in it all." This charge would dampen his ardor and destroy his usefulness.

"If you ever try to do good in the world, conceal it," said this honest, Christian gentleman. The others agreed with him, and so that was the reason they made a secret of the means of prolonging human life, and charged millions of dollars for the knowledge. That is simple enough, surely.

Well, the four honest, Christian gentlemen fitted up a laboratory in Washington and began to experiment. So valuable was some of the apparatus, says the book, that no servant was ever admitted, for fear some accidental carelessness might do injury. These men took care of the room.

³⁷ My own, entirely-speculative suggestion is that "glame" was perhaps the stuff that was communicated by the eye and that enchanted the seer in the old Scots' word "glamour." It was the gleam in the gloaming.

The building, and especially this section of it, became mysterious to some of those who came near it during the day, “but never entered the room of rooms.”³⁸

GLAME could be gathered and increased in one’s body and could be prevented from leaking out. The primary method appears to have consisted of sustained hyperventilation, which the practitioner was encouraged to monitor, so that changes of consciousness—joy, giddiness, cheerfulness—which were said to result from an increase in GLAME, could be assigned a numerical percentage of value (and then reported back to GLAME headquarters by mail). *The Book of Ralston* listed the following random remarks about GLAME:

Have the mind passive during the exercises.

Do not reject the idea until it has been tested one thousand time.

Be willing and anxious to believe it.

The first feeling of GLAME is sometimes a delicate flutter of the heart, as when good news reaches us—a flutter of joy.

Some persons are so affected by the first approach of GLAME that they feel an irresistible desire to shout for joy. The throat swells, the heart leaps, and the eyes dilate.

Some years ago before GLAME was discovered, one of the methods of amusements at parties, was to lift a person from the floor by the first finger of each hand. Everybody filled the lungs full, held the breath, and four or six persons lifted another from the floor.

A person having GLAME in the system can communicate it to others by holding hands. Many diseases are cured in this way, and now and then a man or woman who has learned to accumulate GLAME, either unconsciously or by practicing the art, has astounded the world by great cures.

A person, dead from drowning or suffocation, can not be brought to life by electricity; but four persons, capable of generating GLAME, can, soon after death, restore life. This power never fails. Christ also used it to raise the dead.³⁹

³⁸ Kate Swan, “Do You Yearn for Perpetual Life?” *New York World*, February 23, 1896.

³⁹ *The Ralston Health Club* (Washington, D.C.: Martyn College Press Association, 1894), 67. The admonition to constantly monitor one’s inner states and the accumulation of GLAME seems similar to the spiritualistic practice of developing one’s mediumistic capacities.

GLAME was “what ordinary people call ‘fresh air,’” as one newspaper reporter wagged, but reading the Ralston material closely, it seems the idea was that the Ralston practitioner somehow distilled GLAME from fresh air—especially when there was sunlight present—in a way similar to how the body acquired oxygen from the air (or perhaps similar to how plants used sunlight in photosynthesis).

GLAME was not exactly listed as an ingredient of Ralston products, such as its cereal and its flour. But in the magical alchemical Never Never Land of advertising metaphor, it certainly seemed that one could buy a box chock full of GLAME (or what seemed to be its kindred spirits in other cereals’ pantheon that would come to include Pep, Vim, Zip, Zest, Verve, Zing, Hustle, and possibly Oomph).

GLAME could also be increased by strengthening one’s “magnetism,” which could draw it in and hold it inside. And so Edgerly wrote portentously but vaguely on such subjects as hypnotism, thought transference, Spiritualism, sexual congress, and proper eugenic breeding to create “the New Race,” as well as the controlled modulation of the voice and the practice of a litany of set facial expressions. One of his first volumes, *Lessons in the Mechanics of Personal Magnetism*, and its follow-ons, including *Instantaneous Personal Magnetism* (Instant Ralston, as it were) enticed the book-buying public when it was first issued in 1888 and would continue to do so to some extent over the next four decades or so, practically covering the life span, as a matter of coincidence, of Dale Carnegie, New Thought master of “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” And paralleling in many respects the span of popularity of the New Thought health proselytizer, “The Great Masticator,” Horace Fletcher, who preached his system of “Fletcherism,” consisting of thorough, controlled chewing (For Fletcherites, every bite of food had to be chewed twenty-three times before the moment of deglutition).

Edgerly eventually went so far as to invent a series of exercises that would ostensibly train his followers to avoid any bodily actions that were angular, jerky, slouchwise or sideways, thinking that they would cause their magnetic field to break and their GLAME to leak out.

In creating the multi-celled Ralston Health Club, Webster Edgerly had also founded perhaps the world’s first multilevel marketing scheme. Like many modern variations, it was tied to a New Thought enthusiasm that one could increase one’s own life, health, and wealth, and that one could influence and, through one’s inner attitude, even control others’ relationship to oneself. It was centered on a charismatic, oracular authority who specified the details of one’s behavior and even the content of one’s thoughts. Its finances derived from a pyramidal system by which members recruited other members, who paid a fee to join. Like such schemes today, the initial pitch was that joining was not really a financially significant investment—with the Ralston Health Club, it only entailed a two-dollar fee, which paid for a printed copy of the club’s book of principles and goals. But further teachings and writings were always somehow just out of reach and over the horizon and, in order to obtain these, one needed to spend more.

This pyramidal aspect of the club took off about the time that Edgerly moved to Washington in 1888 and, with the money and facilities of the Martyn College at his disposal, began to print edition after edition of the basic book of the club, as well as many more volumes (something like 160 in all) of other Ralston Club-related books, describing more and more degrees of initiation into more and more inner circles within inner circles, and more and more associated clubs to join, each of which seemingly had its own smaller goal within the wider Ralstonite goals, or each dealing with yet one more occult practice or advanced regimen that the most committed Ralstonite might attain. These included the Psychic Society, the (Personal) Magnetism Club of America, the Mind and Thought Society, and the Adamant Club (based on Edgerly's notions of race theory and racial purity and "degeneration," eugenics, and human transformation, beliefs he shared with most of his contemporary health reformers, such as John Harvey Kellogg). With this explosion in book publishing—and the multiplication of initiate degrees—ordinary members were encouraged to recruit others to whom they could sell the Ralston books at a discount to themselves, and thus finance their own book purchases, and their ascension into the higher ranks of Ralstonism, such as that of the "Progressive Ralstonites."

Edgerly also practiced upon the enthusiasms of the potential buyers of his books by labeling each printing run a new "edition," thus suggesting to those who may have already had a copy that it had been superseded by another—requiring their additional investment in it. This was particularly true of the basic book of the club—*The Book of Complete Membership in the Ralston Health Club*. Although the first printed edition was issued by the Martyn College Press Association in 1888, it is labeled the seventh edition, suggesting to the potential recruit a hoary history of secret editions dating back into the past. As part of the same baiting technique, it seems, the book's different subsequent editions sometimes changed little more than its title, such as *The General Membership of the Ralston Health Club*, *The Companion Book of Complete Membership in the Ralston Health Club*, *The Life Building Method of the Ralston Health Club*, *The Combination Book of the Ralston Health Club*, and *Star Ralstonism*.

One became a Ralstonite simply by pledging oneself to abide by the principles of Ralstonism. One did this through signing the printed pledge sheet in the back of the basic book—each book had a membership number stamped into it—and mailing it, with one's address, to the Ralston Health Club headquarters in Washington (one would have already paid two dollars for the book that contained the pledge sheet).

The compilation of these addresses into a mailing list made it possible for the Ralston Health Club to form a network among its various cells around the country (for a while, promoted at ladies' luncheons and teas of the WCTU, along with other aspects of purity and progressive thought), and made it possible to create a line of products that were either recommended to the membership or that were endorsed by the Club. The most important of these was the Ralston Purina Breakfast Food manufactured by Danforth's newly re-named Ralston-Purina Company, but it also

included the Ralston Health Club's own whole wheat flour, pancake mix, and other grains, as well as other foods, such as cocoa and nut butters, manufactured under license by local companies around the country. And the Ralston Health Club endorsement expanded to include other products, such as a home water distillation unit, and an appliance for administering water enemas. A host of manufacturers eagerly sought Edgerly's endorsement; he was even eventually persuaded to endorse C. W. Post's coffee substitute, Postum.

Edgerly himself sought and gained the endorsement of his own health food products under the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, and the Ralston Club's nutritional advice and products generally met with favorable comments in many of the magazines aimed at women and their domestic life, such as the *Boston Cooking School Magazine*.⁴⁰ The advertising for Ralston-related products, however, was always framed in near-Messianic terms. An ad for Ralston Health Flour, for example, seemed to claim that the "brain bread" made from it would not only bring about the Promise of Ages but would also certainly ensure a regular daily bowel movement. Be ye as children, it advised, who in their natural innocence would prefer to eat what was good for them:

Ralston Health Flour is milled on scientific principles, strictly in accordance with a formula furnished by the Ralston Health Club. The Ralston Health Flour has every element required by the human system, and in exactly the proper proportions to develop a strong, healthy, happy race. If used as an exclusive article of diet it will support life and health longer than any other food (used exclusively) known to man. It is nature's cure for constipation. It cures long-standing cases of dyspepsia if used to the exclusion of the dyspepsia-producing white flour. This bread will preserve the teeth, because it contains all the phosphates of the wheat. It is nature's most perfect food for the brain and nerves. A good test for any food is to place it before children, who have no old notions of prejudices to overcome, and they will eat much more Ralston Health Bread than any other kind of bread, and by so doing satisfy their appetites with a food that is absolutely perfect, and prevent craving for unnatural and hurtful food.⁴¹

The membership of the Ralston Health Club was large, but it is impossible to estimate its numbers. The Club itself gave various numbers, ranging anywhere from 800,000 to eleven million, but all of these numbers are dubious in the extreme.

⁴⁰ Praise for Ralstonism came from the editors of *Good Housekeeping*, for example, in the issues following their publication of "The Speaking Voice, and Its Proper Culture for Everyday Purposes," *Good Housekeeping* 31.4 (October 1900): 176-178, penned under Edgerly's pseudonym Edmund Shaftesbury.

⁴¹ Advertisement for Ralston Health Flour, manufactured by the Topeka Milling Company, *Topeka Advocate*, January 1, 1896. Somehow linked, in my mind, to the Life cereal television ad in which two boys offer some to "Mikey" because "he won't eat anything" and, lo and behold, Mikey digs right in.

Nevertheless, its name and reputation among the progressive health-minded consumers of the country was immense during the period from about 1895 to 1905. In general, the club functioned as a popularizer of vague, rather mundane admonitions about nutrition, health, and hygiene, but with an inner core of members who were interested in more esoteric subjects, such as mind control, foretelling the future, sex magic, hypnotism, the performance arts (including even ventriloquism), eugenics, and exploring the subconscious. Much of the content of the many books that the club published was vacuous—but always hinting at its own cosmic importance, to be grasped by true Ralstonite seekers just over the horizon—and harmless or even helpful (such as the emphasis on drinking pure water to prevent disease), although some of the aphoristic statements even in the health volumes were bizarre enough to raise eyebrows, even at the time (such as the declaration that bananas were poison, or that Caucasians should not eat watermelons, or that bacteria were not part of the animal kingdom).

Within the sea of books that the “Ralston University” would come to publish, it was among the more specialized, esoteric volumes that Edgerly and his associates explored their most idiosyncratic, eccentric and dubious beliefs and practices, ones that elicited denunciations from some more mainstream editors, reviewers, and medical authorities, who did not shy away from labeling Ralstonites as “cranks.” A writer in the *Pedagogical Seminary*, for example, in a book review of *The Ralston Health Club*, wrote: “All in all, the Ralston movement, so far as is apparent to an outsider, is a unique combination of quacking and pretense, used primarily for extracting money, and secondly, for doing the most good, the leaders of the movement, working under evident limitation, are able to do.”⁴² Most notably, *The New York World’s* “Perils of Pauline”-style reporter, Kate Swan, penned an amusingly pawky account of the Ralston Health Club and Edgerly’s publications that detailed the vapid nature of the “secrets” and promises that the Ralston Health Club books contained, and that explained to her syndicated followers and quidnuncs around the country how money was squeezed out of the health seekers who joined, by means of the club’s pyramidal recruiting inducements, tied to the higher “degrees” offered and the ever-increasing ocean of books that flowed from the pens of Edgerly and his organization.⁴³

The local affiliates of the Ralston Health Club were sometimes enthusiastic enough to tailor their own clubs to their members, inviting visiting lecturers to speak at their meetings about subjects they were particularly interested in, or organizing support for a monthly “Ralston Day” on which the public at large would be encouraged to follow the nutritional and spiritual practices of Ralstonism, or setting up local “Ralston Halls,” where, as one group advertised, “young men and women, desirous of being considered of the New Race, may learn freely the laws of physical

⁴² G. Stanley Hall, in *The Pedagogical Seminary* 5.4 (April 1898): 617-618.

⁴³ Kate Swan, “Do You Yearn for Perpetual Life? Then Read This Digest of the Secrets of the Wonderful Ralston Health Club. Otherwise You Must Pay to Learn of Glame,” *New York World*, February 23, 1896.

and moral health, oratory, graceful thought and expression, magnetism, thought transference, memory, literature, music, fine art, love and duty.”⁴⁴ Lacking the records of local clubs’ meetings, one can only speculate, based on brief notices in the newspaper society pages how the meetings were run—whether they might have opened with a recitation of the Ralstonite principles, or a group exercise of deep breathing or concatenated ululations, or proceeded directly into testimonials about reprobates and cures, an exchange of recipes or hints on meal plans or felicitous trends in ladies’ undergarments, an exhortation to recruit new members and to advance to Ralstonism’s higher degrees, the reading of a learned paper on the incidence of bone disease among Polynesians, or even perhaps a costumed skit expressive of the progress of a wheat flake through the alimentary canal. But certainly, distilled water was offered as refreshment.

The club contained some number of people who were not only true believers in Ralstonism, but who were prepared to prescribe it by legislative fiat upon their neighbors, if it had been possible. “We, as loyal Ralstonites,” wrote one of them to the *Brownsville Daily Herald*, “should insist that Ralston day be celebrated in all public and private schools every month. Several states have passed laws compelling teachers to instruct their pupils in physical culture and hygiene. We think they should have named the Ralston system as compulsory, for the reason that it is the only American method.”⁴⁵

The Ralston Club begat imitators, at least one of which was set up by one of Edgerly’s associates, David H. Reeder. A young and dashing traveling agent for a piano company in Kansas City, he suddenly re-created himself in 1897 as “Dr. David H. Reeder, M.D., Ph.D.” and began issuing the *New Race Magazine*, on the subjects of health, race improvement, literature, and general progressive inspiration. He soon moved his publication briefly to Chicago and then to LaPorte, Indiana. The *New Race Magazine*, in its short life, featured articles by Edgerly, as well as other Ralston stalwarts, such as Alice May Youse. Not long thereafter, Reeder began traveling around the country lecturing on Ralstonism, and eventually appeared in Baltimore, on the roster of faculty at the Shaftesbury College there.⁴⁶ By 1900, he was more or

⁴⁴ “Ethical Ralston Society,” advertisement in *Food, Home and Garden* (July 1897), the magazine of the Vegetarian Society of America (Philadelphia).

⁴⁵ “A Ralstonite,” *Brownsville Daily Herald*, May 5, 1903.

⁴⁶ In 1902, Indiana newspapers were reporting that Alice May Youse was seriously considering relocating to LaPorte from Baltimore, in order to organize a “female seminary.” However, that did not materialize—David Reeder brought someone else back to LaPorte from Baltimore—“Dr. David H. Reeder of Laporte, Ind., well known in Chicago, and Miss Maude Angela Warner of Baltimore were married last evening in this city [Baltimore]. He is 40 and she 18. A month ago Dr. Reeder came to Baltimore. At a reception he met Miss Warner. The following day he called at her home. He asked Miss Warner to accompany him to Gwynne Oak Park. She consented, and that afternoon they became engaged,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 30, 1902.

less permanently settled in LaPorte, where he set about creating the “Home Health Club” based on the model of the Ralston Health Club, and attempted to create a company in Elkhart to manufacture a breakfast food product made from wheat, which he named “Re-New-U-Food.”

Reeder’s allied ventures on behalf of his Home Health Club, however, brought him into controversy with medical authorities such as the American Medical Association and eventually the police. “Dr.” Reeder created a regular newspaper column of health and medical advice (the “Home Health Department”) and answered questions from his readers, under the aegis of the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, but then syndicated to many other newspapers. It was criticized because, not only was Reeder not an M.D., but also because it essentially served as a front for recommending and merchandising the patent medicine products, largely quackish but some downright dangerous, of his own mail-order “Home Remedies Company,” run out of LaPorte and Chicago.⁴⁷ Reeder’s sexual libido appears to have been as strong as Edgerly’s, and his whirlwind marriages and divorces were reported in the papers.⁴⁸

Edmund Shaftesbury: “Some Ethereal Visitor Enters Now”⁴⁹

The Ralston Health Club suddenly blossomed into a nationwide success about the time that Edgerly moved to Washington to set up his school of oratory, elocution, and acting.⁵⁰ The usual course of study was two years and included voice and elocution training for public speaking, reading, recitation, and singing, some training for the expression of physical gestures and facial expressions, breathing exercises, light gymnastics, literature (especially Shakespeare), poetry, music, and dance. Faculty were assigned to various subjects. Edgerly’s wife Edna, for example, was assigned to “Delsarte; Grace; Deportment; Culture; Gestures; Attitudes; Pantomime; Bird-Notes; Recitations; Shaftesbury; Impersonations; Statue Posing.”⁵¹ Students were also subjected to a stream of visiting lecturers—often clergymen or captains of

⁴⁷ See the long section on Reeder and the Home Health Club in *Some Quasi-Medical Institutions* (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1916), 17-24, reprinted from the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, December 11, 1915. Reeder’s forays into prescribing and publicizing “healthful” sex techniques eventually had him arrested; see the jocularly-worded article, “Doc Reeder’s Sex Lessons Get Him in Quacks’ Revue: Joins Cast at Urgent Request of State Inspector,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 1918.

⁴⁸ This aspect of Reeder’s personality was alluded to in a “Horoscope of Dr. David H. Reeder,” *Planets and People* 5.1 (1899): 40-42—“The doctor has a good many planets in the sign of marriage, and if ‘two is company’ he has a crowd, which means a range of experiences.”

⁴⁹ The epigram that Edgerly chose for his *Lessons in Personal Magnetism*.

⁵⁰ The school’s prospectus, incorporation papers, and other related documents are held at the Washington Historical Society.

⁵¹ *Annual Catalogue of Martyn College of Oratory, for the School Year of 1897-98*.

industry who sermonized on New Thought topics or vague general moral exhortations to progressive uplift.

Female students in the “Physical Culture” classes were encouraged to wear a specially fashioned “Ralston Suit for Ladies,” which was a mid-calf length dress and waist made of black serge, with long sleeves, and a light yellow (“corn”) tie and a scarf tied around the waist.

Public recitals were not uncommon and were invariably featured as a part of the annual graduation ceremonies. The programs for these give the impression that they consisted mainly of readings of Negro or Yiddish dialect pieces, histrionic renditions of poems by such New Age authors as Ella Wheeler Wilcox, expressive songs of the *sturm und drang* school of German *lied*, stirring selections of oratory by such speechifiers as Edward Bellamy or William Jennings Bryan, acted scenes from Shakespeare (the sleepwalking scene from *Macbeth* was especially popular; also Ophelia’s drowning was quite the thing), impersonations, ventriloquism demonstrations, and some Isadora Duncan-like flitting about in filmy “Grecian” robes or set arrays of students in *tableaux vivants* under colored lights, with each student fixed into a posture and facial expression supposed to convey a different mood. All in all, cornucopias of earnest high Victorian play, placed in an American setting.⁵²

Alongside the books he published that were really aimed at the present or potential health club reader or the student of the occult powers, Edgerly also issued some with his acting students in mind, such as *Lessons in the Art of Acting*, *Lessons in Artistic Deep Breathing for Strengthening the Voice*; *Lessons in Emphasis and the Analysis of Language*; *Lessons in Grace*; *Lessons in the Art of Extemporaneous Speaking*; *Lessons in the Art of Facial Expression*; *Lessons in the Art of Ventriloquism*; *Lessons in Voice Culture*; *The Edgerly Natural Reader, Speaker and Conversationalist*; *Shaftesbury Recitations*; and *One Hundred Lessons in Punctuation*.

Edgerly even created a new “language”—presumably from the same universalistic impulse that had driven the creator of Esperanto and other fabricated languages—which he called “The Adam-man Tongue.”⁵³ It is difficult to believe that the samples he gave were not self-parodies of ethnic dialects of English found in vaudeville,

⁵² *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* detailed the programs of these recitals on their society pages; Edgerly also sometimes wrote synopses of each school year’s activities in columns he submitted to *Werner’s Magazine*, the journal of vocal and physical expression that served at the time as the main national newsletter for professional elocutionists, orators, and actors.

⁵³ Edmund Shaftesbury, *The Adam-man Tongue: The Universal Language of the Human Race* (Washington, D.C.: 1903).

rendered with a pseudo-scholarly alphabet of lexicographical ligatures and symbols that far outstripped those proposed by other earnest spelling reformers.⁵⁴

He also tried his hand in the professional theater. In 1890, he wrote, produced, directed, managed the finances, and took the leading role in *Christopher Columbus; or, the Discovery of America*, with his students in supporting roles. *The Washington Post* summarized: “The plot turns on the treacherous hatred of Bobadilla, the villain of the play, towards his successful rival, Columbus, which is represented as increased by unholy love for Beatrice, the ‘witch-wife’ of Columbus, a woman strangely gifted with preternatural powers. The play is said to be full of human and tragic interest, and, as arranged by its author, offers opportunity for a scenic display portraying the voyage of Columbus and the future greatness of America.”⁵⁵ It opened for a very short run at the National Theater in Washington. It then played for an even shorter run in Chicago, and at the Windsor Theatre in New York. *The New York Times*’ acerbic review is worth quoting at length:

The originator, concocter, and financial backer of this forlorn enterprise is a misguided person, who evidently labors under the triple hallucination that he is a poet, a dramatist, and an actor. ... With a modesty that is overwhelming he announces that his work is “the greatest play of modern times,” and that “his acting is wonderful.” If absurdity constitutes greatness and incompetence engenders wonder, no one will gainsay this proposition.

Mr. Edgerly wrote his play especially for Mr. Shaftesbury, he declares. This is not astonishing when it is known that Edgerly and Shaftesbury are one and the same person. By combining the two functions of actor and author, Christopher Columbus becomes, in the hands of Mr. Edgerly, a portly individual of uncertain age, who struts up and down the stage spouting the most extraordinary balderdash that ever fell from mortal lips. In his endeavors to prove to the Spanish Junta that the world is round Columbus uses an every-day school globe, with a map of the American continent clearly painted on its surface. And yet with such evidence as this he cannot carry his

⁵⁴ Anita Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages: A Celebration of Linguistic Creativity, Madness, and Genius* (New York: Random House, 2010) 148-149, for a little sample. Stenography, which some of Edgerly’s students may have studied in the college’s “business section,” was invented and popularized by Isaac Pitman, and was also a “progressive” discipline, according to the reformers of the time—not only was it “scientific” in its reduction of the spoken language to a discrete set of written symbols, but it eliminated the stenographer’s own filtering mind that interfered between the person who dictated and the written record of what had been said. It was similar, therefore, to what the phonographic amanuensis attempted to achieve when transcribing a spirit medium’s discourses, and was therefore also a sort of allied discipline to training in automatic writing. In addition, it provided an improved tool for the professional employment of women.

⁵⁵ “Professor Edgerly’s Drama, ‘Columbus,’” *Washington Post*, June 8, 1890.

point. It is not surprising, therefore, that he betakes himself to an impossible wood and clutches great handfuls of dismal atmosphere. At the same time he displays huge calves, that suggest padding, and declaims long passages of execrable blank verse in a whistling voice that justifies the inference that Columbus must have worn false teeth even before he started on his famous voyage of discovery.

What is more wonderful still, when Columbus begins to grow old he does it with such vehement rapidity that he reaches the last stages of senility while all the other characters in the play remain as youthful as when the play began. Mr. Edgerly lays great stress on the history correctness of his incidents and costumes, and yet he introduces a New-York Chinaman into the leading scene at San Salvador and dresses up an Indian maiden with a modern sash and bustle. If the author of "Christopher Columbus" had intended his play to be a burlesque instead of a serious drama the result could not have been funnier.⁵⁶

Another of Edgerly's efforts at playwriting and production, based on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," with one of his students playing the role of "Lenore," met with an even greater critical disapproval the following year.

All in all, Edgerly's thespian career, including his efforts as impresario of the Martyn College, was nowhere near as financially successful as his career as health food guru and mystagogue of the Occult. In fact, the Martyn College's reputation suffered a near-fatal blow as the result of a public "indignation meeting" held in Washington in June of 1894 by some of his students and some of the school's faculty and others—particularly some renowned educators and social leaders whose endorsement of the college Edgerly had claimed in the school's advertisements and catalogs, but who had not actually given it.⁵⁷

The immediate cause of the meeting was Edgerly's failure to award any diplomas to that year's senior class. Instead, immediately after the "commencement," he had sailed for Europe for an extended summer vacation.

At the indignation meeting, Edgerly's few lukewarm supporters were far outnumbered by outraged current and former students. Aside from their complaints about the graduation, the disgruntled senior class listed a series of questions that suggested deep irregularities about the school, most especially

⁵⁶ "Windsor Theatre," *New York Times*, August 19, 1890.

⁵⁷ "Embryo Actors Angry: Martyn College Orators Got No Diplomas This Years, Professor Edgerly Arraigned," *Washington Post*, June 22, 1894; "His Pupils Are Relentless: Prof. Webster Edgerly the Subject of an Indignation Meeting," June 22, 1894 (picked up and reprinted as "Elocutionary Commotion in Washington" in *Werner's Magazine* (August 1894): 303; "Indignant Students: They Do Not Like Their Treatment by the Principal of Martyn College," *Washington Evening Star*, June 22, 1894; "Edgerly Anxiously Awaited," *Washington Times*, August 14, 1894.

questioning the school's deliberately misleading advertisements and catalog that suggested a large and renowned faculty and a detailed and comprehensive curriculum, which the school had never provided. In addition, questions were raised about how Edgerly's Ralston Health Club business impinged on the working of the school—for example, it was said, the school's students had often been drafted into buying "Frog-in-the-Throat" lozenges at a nearby apothecary shop (for ten cents a box) and then, under Edgerly's direction, had been made to slather each lozenge with carbolic acid and then repackage them, so that the Ralston Health Club could send them out to members (at fifty cents a box) for use as suppositories or for dissolving in enemas. The printed questions circulated at the meeting included, "Why does Webster Edgerly (Everett Ralston), in his circulars advertising his Health Club, 'positively guarantee' to permanently cure diseases which the medical profession have pronounced incurable?" His Health Club publications were assailed as well, with the suggestion that much of their content was simply collected from other sources (probably by a staff) and re-packaged as his own work.

Pointed questions were also raised about Edgerly's own shady past—such as why he had stopped practicing law in Massachusetts, and why he went by more than one name. During the open session, several students declared that the general feeling among the college's students was that Edgerly was an out-and-out, thorough scoundrel, and it was following these denunciations that an account was provided of Edgerly's prickly past by his own current father-in-law, who had been so upset when his daughter Edna had disobeyed his wishes and married Edgerly that he had hired a private detective to trace Edgerly's background. It was his account of the irregularities in Edgerly's previous legal history and his marriages—especially his charge that Edgerly was secretly married to Mrs. Scott-Saxton in Denver—that was reported in the following day's *Washington News*.

When Edgerly returned from Europe in August, the readers of the *Washington* newspapers anxiously awaited his reply to the charges that had been made against him and the school. And he did threaten a tempest of retaliation. But in fact, the only public reply he made was to sue the *Washington News* for libel for reporting the claim that he was secretly married (which suit he eventually lost because the article had only reported the claim as what had been said at a public meeting and had passed it on without comment). The other action he took almost immediately was to assemble a board of trustees for Martyn College (including his mother-in-law and his sister) and to file formal papers for incorporating the school as the Martyn College of Elocution and Oratory. This had not been done before, and could well explain why Edgerly had suddenly decided just before the previous graduation ceremony not to award degrees—because the College did not legally exist and might have had to face prosecution for misrepresenting its degree-granting ability.

After this summer of indignation, the future of the College began to dim quickly, although it and its sister school in Baltimore continued to function in one form or another for some years, and after less than a decade was reduced to functioning

essentially as an office for marketing and distributing the Ralston health products and literature.⁵⁸

After his setback, with its attendant negative publicity, Edgerly began looking for a new home. In the summer of 1895, he bought a fifteen-acre parcel of land on the north side of Hopewell, New Jersey overlooking the town and commenced building a mansion there with elaborate landscaping. He and his family first considered it their summer residence, but they soon began spending more time there than they did in Washington.

It was while he was building up his estate that he reached the deal with Danforth that would bring “Ralston Breakfast Cereal” to the breakfast table of America and that would, through Danforth’s Ralston Purina Company, place the name of Ralston into the twentieth centuries annals of the mass commercial industrialization of breakfast food and animal feed.

Even from the beginning, Edgerly intended the estate in Hopewell to be much more than simply an escape from Washington and from urban vexations, a luxurious and grand summer vacation spot. He had plans even then to establish a permanent home there for Ralstonism, to make the mansion—the “castle” it came to be called—the center of a grand university of the followers of his regimen and way of life, and to plot out an entire community around it, “Ralston Heights,” where Ralstonites could live, work, and learn.

When his purchase of land in Hopewell became known in the town, an excited local booster wrote to him, asking him about his plans for settling there. Edgerly wrote a reply in return, which was published in the local *Hopewell Journal*. It included this:

The “Ralston Health Club” will sooner or later have a large college somewhere. Its tremendous membership would make any town a city very soon, and a famous one at that. Our club has the power to make Hopewell known the world over.⁵⁹

The mansion was finished in 1900, and Mr. and Mrs. Edgerly established themselves there in the community of Hopewell over the next few years as they set about raising their two daughters and making improvements to the property, such as laying out garden paths that were invariably curved, so that anyone following them would not have occasion to leak GLAME, adding Gothic turrets to its imposing sides, and developing a large garden park upon eccentric lines that might be favorably compared to what D. W. Griffith might have imaged the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to have been like.

⁵⁸ By 1906, Edgerly appears to have closed down the school, but kept a home and publishing office in Washington on Rhode Island Avenue, which was listed under his name until 1917. During the war, he rented out that house to the government, which used it to board soldiers.

⁵⁹ *Hopewell Herald*, December 17, 1895.

While building up this grand estate, however, Edgerly published a volume within the Ralston corpus that might suggest another motive for moving from the city of Washington and away from those who opposed Ralstonism. It suggests that Edgerly intended the Hopewell property as a kind of survivalist redoubt or racial Shangri-La to which a white brotherhood might repair amid the societal threats of growing urban and racial decay. This volume was the *Book of the Adamant Club; a Re-Union of the Caucasians*, in which he developed an outlandish theory of the evolution of the white race and the constant historical threats to it by its intermixing with inferior races, who tended toward corruption and criminality. “Our first duty,” he wrote, “is to protect ourselves from their criminal propensities, to save our homes from their wantonness, and to shield our sisters and daughters from their debauchery. They are all about us, but we see them in the open.”⁶⁰ Although he chose not to directly address “the question of the right of our race to check the increasing population of persons whose presence in the world is a menace to civilization,” he left little doubt that “our” race certainly did have such a right, even if the practical means to enforce it might be debated.

One way to achieve it would certainly have included setting up a “come-outer” utopian community such as Edgerly envisioned for Hopewell, where, for example, suitable male and female Ralstonites would learn and practice controlled “sexual hygiene” in such a way that the eugenic purity of their offspring would be ensured, thus helping the New Race to appear and establish itself.

In 1905, Edgerly issued a booklet-sized prospectus for purchasers of plots of land at Ralston Heights, with an eye to recruiting committed Ralstonites to settle there. The prospectus is invaluable as a window onto Edgerly’s vision of an encapsulated community of believers and practitioners, but as an inducement to the sale of plots of land, it was almost worthless. Only a few plots were sold. Some of the planned streets were demarcated, a grand pool with fountains was built, but investors did not materialize, and the great vision faded into smaller and smaller dimensions as the decade wore on.⁶¹ Nevertheless, during the following two decades, Edgerly lived in the grand style there, motoring about the region in a succession of expensive automobiles, taking extended tours of Europe, and playing the part of a member of the landed gentry.

In March 1925, Edgerly entered into an agreement with Albert Lewis Pelton from Meriden, Connecticut, who specialized in mail-order self-help books, such as Frank C. Haddock’s *Power of the Will* and Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich*, by which he

⁶⁰ *Book of the Adamant Club* (Washington, D.C.: Ralston Publishing Company, 1903), 29, 43.

⁶¹ The mansion still stands and its present owners are maintaining it with a good-humored nod to its eccentric and remarkable past. An archaeologist has worked on site to reveal the remaining traces of the originally planned utopian community—see Janet Six, “Hidden History of Ralston Heights,” *Archaeology* 57.3 (May-June 2004): 30-35.

conveyed to Pelton the right to print and sell the Ralston University Press books, in return for royalties to be paid to Edgerly. For a few years afterwards, Pelton's advertisements for the books—especially for *Instantaneous Personal Magnetism*—ran in the back pages of such publications as *Photoplay*, *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics*, tucked among ads for mail-order courses on electricity, muscle building, auto mechanics, breast enlargement, and suchlike. But Pelton's publications formed the subject of a complaint to the Federal Trade Commission in 1929 about their misrepresentations of medical and other facts (such as the claim in the new ads that the "Ralston University" had moved to Connecticut), and in 1931 Pelton was ordered to cease and desist publishing them.⁶²

For the last few years of his life, Edgerly resided at a house in Trenton, although he still owned the estate in Hopewell. He died in Trenton, not two hundred years after he was born but on November 5, 1926, and was buried nearby in the First Presbyterian Church of Ewing Cemetery. He left his wife Edna an estate of \$250,000, including the value of the Hopewell property, which she sold the year after his death.

Through Danforth's Ralston Purina Company and especially its breakfast cereals, the Ralston name continued to live on. In 1994, Ralston Purina spun off its breakfast cereal business to Ralcorp, a holding company, which operated as Ralston Foods, which then, in turn, sold the cereal business to General Mills. In 2007, Ralcorp acquired Post Cereals (of C. W. Post lineage), and in 2011 Ralcorp was swallowed up by ConAgra Foods in a hostile takeover. It is remarkable that, throughout all these years and all these changes, the "Ralston" name, in one form or another, has persisted, being recognized as worth a dollar or two for whoever can market it to the great public who sits down every morning to the breakfast table.

⁶² In the Matter of Albert L. Pelton, Trading as Ralston University Press, *Federal Trade Commission Decisions* 15 (September 28, 1931), 266-275.