

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 32
Rose Mackenberg

(Dead Ladies Show Music - *Little Lily Swing* by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through live history storytelling in front of a delightful audience in Berlin and beyond. Well, here in April 2020, we're not really at peak live anything right now. Luckily, we have enough previously recorded stories of Dead Ladies to keep the podcast going for quite a while. And that's partly thanks to our intrepid sister show in New York City. We'll be hearing a presentation from them in this episode. Before that though, I want to do a couple things.

First, I want to say thank you to all of you for listening. Things are rough, things are strange, things are unpredictable. We're glad you're out there. And we hope you're ok. It's a tough time for audiences, but it's an even tougher time for venues. So I wanted to give a shout-out to our beloved Berlin host, ACUD. They have 38 employees, and they're trying to keep everyone going. ACUD doesn't just host the Dead Ladies Show, they offer concerts, club nights, book launches, talks, and performances of all sorts, and they're important to the community in Berlin. They have a fund-raiser going on, and I'll link to it in the show notes of the podcast in case you'd like to take a look.

In New York, the KGB Bar's Red Room is the home of their monthly Dead Ladies Show. It's a beautiful and tiny tin-ceilinged gin palace, located in a building dating from 1838. In a previous life, the Red Room was actually the headquarters of podcast episode 30 star Emma Goldman's secret society of anarchists in 1914. So that's some Dead Lady street cred for you. They are currently accepting donations to keep the bar and its employees afloat, and I'll have a link for you to that initiative as well. Both of these venues have special offers for supporters, too. Now if you prefer, please lend a thought to your own favorite local place where you go for cookies or cocktails, live music or literature fests. They could surely use a hand in these times.

Okay, now, to conjure up today's surprising Dead Lady, we have a dynamic duo. Nicole Saraniero is a freelance writer and photographer who has been featured on *Untapped New York* and *The Culture Trip*. She is a lover of old buildings, ghost stories, and lantern-guided cemetery tours. Okay, a lot of spooky stuff. And Dana Lewis is a high school English teacher in Queens, New York. In addition to teaching she runs two clubs at school, true crime and girls empowerment, which are pertinent to her chosen Dead Lady. The woman in question is ghostbuster extraordinaire, and New Yorker, Rose Mackenberg, an investigator of spurious spiritualists and a debunker of fraudulent mediums. Rose was dedicated to saving those Americans who wanted to connect beyond the veil from being taken for a ride. And, she worked with one of the most famous magicians of all time. Our presentation begins at the scene of a Congressional Subcommittee Hearing in

1926. We hear first from Nicole, in the role of Representative Frank Reid, and then from Dana, as Rose Mackenberg

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Will you give us your name, please.

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: Reverend Rose Mackenberg. May I make a request before beginning? I would ask not to be interrupted, because when I was talking before I was repeatedly interrupted.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: We will not have you interrupted by anybody except us. We will interrupt you when we think it is appropriate. Tell us, how long have you been a reverend?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I have been ordained six times as a Spiritualistic minister, and I also own two churches. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: You own two churches?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: Yes, I do.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Where?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG:
In Hartford and in Worcester

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Go and tell us about your being ordained. What is your record in your spiritual work? You said you had been ordained six times?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: Yes. And I have investigated 300 mediums.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: I want to know about your being ordained.

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I've been ordained by the spiritualistic church within the time limit from 20 minutes, being the shortest time it took to be ordained, to two days.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Were you ordained on the square? Or did you go through it for the purposes of this investigation? I want to get at what your attitude was so that the committee may give your testimony wait as we consider.

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I was ordained with the same rights as an orthodox minister and I have the same privileges: to baptize, to marry, to bury.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Did you believe it when you were getting it?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I was in search of the truth.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Did you ever find it?

NICOLE SARANIERO: What you just heard was the beginning of Rose Mackenberg's testimony before a subcommittee of the United States Congress in 1926. In the exchange, Rose is asked about the six ordinations she obtained from various Spiritualist churches and whether she truly believed the spiritualism when she was getting ordained. Also present at that hearing, which lasted for four days, was the legendary illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini, or as he described himself at the hearing, a psychic investigator for the scientific magazines of the world, and then a mysterious entertainer. Houdini and Mackenberg were in D.C. to present their findings from years of investigation into the ghost racket, an industry of fortune telling, speaking to the dead, and other spiritualist practices that they found to be nothing more than acts of fraud. Their arguments in front of Congress were in support of Bill HR898, which read in part, "Any person who by game or device sleight of hand, pretending, fortune telling, or by any trick or other means, any person pretending to remove spells or to sell charms for protection or to unite the separated, fraudulently obtained from another person, money or property or award shall be considered a disorderly person."

They wanted fortune telling and mediumistic practices outlawed in D.C. Opposing Houdini and Mackenberg during the hearing are popular psychics and mediums like the Reverend H.P. Strack, secretary of the National Spiritualist Association of America. These spiritualists invoke their first Amendment right and stated that spiritualism was a religion, which they were free to express. Rose wrote later of the trial and its turbulent nature, "The effect of my simple statements was extraordinary. Pandemonium or panic would be too pallid a term to apply to what followed. With a clatter and a roar, local spiritualists who were present stormed up to the committee table, shouting incoherent defenses of their practices, and asserting wild phrases, their entire honesty and respectability. One man tried to attack Houdini but was physically restrained. So how did an argument over spiritualism nearly come to blows, and what is spiritualism anyway? Why did Houdini and his team of secret spies spend years trying to bust the ghost racket? It starts with these joyful-looking ladies here. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

Spiritualism, or the belief that the living can communicate with the dead has been explored around the world since ancient times. But in America the rise of modern spiritualism is largely credited to the Fox sisters, along with other philosophies and characters that gain traction in the mid-19th century. One night, the Fox sisters claimed to hear strange raps and thumps in the farmhouse they shared with their parents. Their mother and a neighbor were brought into the room where they claimed to hear the noises and were thoroughly spooked. They immediately determined that the noises came from a malevolent spirit in the home, and they shipped Maggie and Katie off to live with their sister Leah in Rochester, New York. At the time, Rochester was a hotbed for religious reform, as it's also the point of origin for Mormonism and Millerism, the precursor to Seventh-day Adventism. In Rochester, word of the Fox sisters' ability to communicate with the dead spread rapidly. With help from notable community leaders, the Fox sisters were pushed into the limelight and were eventually touring the country claiming to make contact with countless departed souls in front of enraptured audiences, who came out to hear the mysterious raps and knocks from the spirit world. Eventually, after years of deception, the sisters would admit that the whole venture was a lie that snowballed

out of proportion. Maggie revealed how they would create the mysterious wrapping noises using apples on strings and -- this part gives me the willies -- by manipulating their knuckle joints in their fingers and toes. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

Despite this blow, the spiritualist community continued to flourish, and in the 1920s, a series of tragic events brought about its resurgence. At the time, the country was reeling from the unimaginable loss of life from World War I, along with the lives lost to the Spanish Flu Epidemic, which raged in 1918. These events created a new generation of the bereaved: millions of people desperate to stay connected to their lost loved ones. Mourners flock to the parlors of mediums and psychics for a chance to hear anything from behind the veil. Further supporting the resurgence was a surge in scientific discovery, which seems counterintuitive. At the turn of the century, America was making huge strides in technology and science: we discovered that the universe was expanding, television was invented, the talkies, and commercial air travel was becoming a reality. But rather than using science to debunk psychic phenomena, some were using it to support the existence of supernatural powers. Sir Oliver Lodge was a pioneer in the fields of electromagnets and radio research, and also the president of London's Society for Psychical Research. Lodge used scientific facts to support the idea that the universe was filled with ether. He believed that is where the spirit world was found, and that just like a radio signal could connect to different places on earth, a medium could connect someone on earth to a spirit in the ether. Rose Mackenberg was born in 1892 in New York. She was a believer in spiritualism. She attended seances with friends, and was for a time one of the 'shut eyes,' people who unflinchingly believed that the phenomenon mediums produced came from the spirit world. Eventually though, her eyes were opened.

DANA LEWIS: Rose soon figured out the tricks the mediums were using, and intricately unraveled their illusions as a very successful investigator. In one instance, Rose exposed a self-proclaimed spiritualist, pastor Herman E. Parker from Chicago. She dressed as a widow named Mrs. Rosalind Richards and visited the pastor for a private sitting, asking that he contact her deceased husband. After putting on a show of falling into a so-called trance, he claimed that he had brought the fictional dead husband forward to visit his fictional grieving wife. But it didn't stop there. Rose believed the pastor was doing much more to his grieving clients than just lying to their faces in a fake trance. At the end of her sitting, Rose put on a show, crying that she needed to ask her husband whether she should accept the \$3,000 settlement for his death. Pastor Parker recommended taking the money, and investing \$1,000 in a company called Wilcox Transportation, a company Parker himself had created. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Rose continued along in the charade until she had gathered enough evidence to present to the Investors Protective Bureau, and Parker and his accomplice were tried and found guilty of fraud, thanks to Rose. (AUDIENCE WHISTLES AND LAUGHS) It's just a picture of Houdini. When Harry met Rose in the early 1920s, he was fighting his own battles against fraudulent mediums. Rose even approached him for advice on a banker who allegedly invested the bank's funds in worthless stocks on the advice of a medium. That advice led to his hiring her to work alongside him. It's been written rather lyrically, that Houdini had been possessed by spiritualism following his mother's death, and sought to prey upon those who preyed on him, that he attended seances

trying to contact her and there realized what so many of these mediums were actually doing. While it is true that Houdini was horribly consumed by his mother's death, often spending long hours in the cemetery by her grave, he did not attend a seance until nearly a decade after her death, and is noted to have been suspicious of the supernatural since he was a child.

But, Arthur Conan Doyle, author of Sherlock Holmes, and his wife Jean did play a significant role in Houdini's foray into the unknown spiritual worlds. The Doyles were great friends with Houdini and great believers in spiritualism, and Jean Doyle even practiced as a medium. In Atlantic City in 1922, Jean offered to practice a seance session to contact Houdini's mother, Jean produced 15 pages of writing during this apparent trance state, where Houdini's mother was supposedly communicating with her son in perfect English, and under the sign of the cross. And yet Houdini's mother, the wife of a rabbi, never knew how to read, write, or speak English. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Rose Mackenberg wrote affectionately of Houdini and of his complicated relationship with Doyle after Houdini's death. She referenced Doyle many times in her writing as an example of an otherwise intelligent and accomplished person who devoutly believed in spiritualism. Doyle had lost his son and his dedication to spiritualism is attributed to this great loss. Rose quoted part of Houdini's testimony to Congress in one of her later articles he had asked, "Why does Conan Doyle even claim that I possess supernatural powers when I can demonstrate that all the effects I achieve are by trickery, and are nothing an ordinary man of equal skill couldn't do?"

NICOLE SARANIERO: According to a psychic investigator of the time, it was estimated that by 1932, 20 million people per year were losing \$125 million to spiritualist hoaxes. This is what enraged Rose and Houdini, and what drove them to commit decades of their lives to exposing the frauds. It's what brought them to Washington, D.C. armed with years of ammunition against the fraudulent spiritualists. They had no problem with spiritualism itself. Rose later wrote of Houdini, "From the bottom of his fine soul, he wanted passionately to believe in spiritualism." And she never scoffed at those who honestly believed in the readings they were getting or giving, people like Mr. and Mrs. Doyle. It was only those who preyed on the weak that they attacked. Rose, who lived through the aftermath of two World Wars, wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1951: "To these charlatans who take cruel advantage of human grief and anxiety, war brings boom times. The anguish of friends and relatives of the dead, wounded or missing servicemen offers a fertile field for heartless deception. Fathers, mothers, wives, sweethearts, and others close to those in the armed service flocked to the seances of these counterfeit dealers in the occult. They receive messages from the beyond -- plenty of them, provided the usual offering is donated. I do not impugn spiritualism as a sect or as a sincere religious belief. There are many intellectually honest persons, some mediums included, who gets solace from belief in contacts with the afterworld. My work concerns only those mediums who deceive trusting persons." So how do they separate the honest believers from the fakes?

DANA LEWIS: Rose know exactly how to use the powerful tool of fraudulent mediums and psychics against them — deception — and she did it well. This has been referred to as deceptive activism. Those like Houdini and Mackenberg, would

infiltrate seances and use covert deceptive techniques to expose poor methodology. She used method acting, misdirection, and other practice trickery. Rose worked closely with Houdini to enact their plans against these types of imposters. She was a part of a team that would travel ahead of Houdini when he was on tour. They would then collect evidence of sham spiritualism. Rose revealed the team's methods in her *Spook Spy* exposes, which were published in many American publications such as *Look* and *Popular Science*, Rose wrote that each member of the team would be booked into a different hotel. They would use fake names of course. Rose said a favorite of hers was Ruth Nash, though she often got creative with names such as Frances Raud, or Allicia Bunck, the name that appears on one of the six spiritualist ordination licenses she was asked about during the congressional hearings. Once checked in, they immersed themselves in town. So Rose often stalked around department stores to observe the fashion of the locals. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So good! She then adopted a character like those seen here. So we have the 'Small-town Matron, 'Semi-invalid,' which is probably offensive nowadays — that's why I put it in quotes. 'Woman Seeking Lost Relatives,' 'Vamp from the Country,' and a very big favorite -- 'Topsy Consultant.' (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

So a quote pulled from her Congressional Hearing shows evidence of Mackenberg's intentions and true feelings on these fraudsters. When asked whether the so-called spiritualists she would fake out were concerned with her sincerity, when she infiltrated their seances posing as a believer, Rose answered, "They asked me no questions as to whether I was sincere or not. All they were interested in is the amount of money I could pay them." Armed with a fake backstory such as a lost husband or a dead child, of which she had neither, Rose sought consultations and participated in seances with local mediums. She wrote that the more fantastically improbable the story, the more apt was the medium to fall for it. After making their observations and leaving a chalk mark in the medium's bathroom to prove that they were there, the team would then report back to Houdini. And she wrote that memorization of the medium's features was an important part of the job, because as Houdini had his stage show, he would then expose them during his show in very dramatic fashion, so you have to know exactly what they looked like.

NICOLE SARANIERO: Mediums dazzled spectators and clients with a variety of phenomena, often showy and dramatic, to prove that they were making contact with the spirit world. However, many of these phenomena employ the same methods of trickery that magicians use in their stage shows. Many magicians of the time, not just Houdini, made a sort of sport of exposing the mediums, though they of course guarded their own secrets tightly. Automatic writing, table tipping, the ejection of ectoplasm, spirit photography, floating musical instruments that seemed to play themselves, and messages conveyed through Ouija boards — Rose had a blast debunking each and every one of these methods, and explained how each was accomplished in her later exposes. Spirit photography was a very popular technique, a conclusive proof used by spiritualists. After all, how could you argue with a photograph? Rose wrote an entire article dedicated to explaining how all spirit photography was either 1: an error or blunder on the part of the photographer, or 2: a deliberate attempt to hoodwink the person to whom the picture is to be shown.

Now again, she was adamant in pointing out that she did not declare flatly that there is no such thing as spirit photography. "I have sought earnestly and unremittingly and alertly for proof that it may exist," she said. Often at seances, or captured in spirit photography, there would also be ectoplasm coming out of the medium's mouth. This substance was a cloudy materialization of a spirit. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) In reality, Rose revealed that it was often either finally shredded or crumbled membrane of some animals lung, probably that of a sheep, which takes dedication to shove in your mouth and hold for a while, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) or chiffon so treated and doctored as to appear spiritual. That one looks like a nice kind of netting of some kind. Yeah. Another popular and convincing method of proving a connection to the spirits was ghostly trumpet playing.

Here you can see Rose with a trumpet seemingly floating above her head, in this case played by a hidden assistant behind the curtain, while she cupped her hands around her mouth to distort the sound of her voice. Rose wrote of those who took part in the trumpet racket that, "The bulk of them — I do not refer to men and woman who actually believe in trumpet voices — are clumsy frauds, and their clients are for the most part, credulous and stupid. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) But the game itself is interesting technically. Some use complicated mechanisms that extended the horns or created fake hands so that they could seem to keep their hands on the table while actually using them to play the instrument in the air."

DANA LEWIS: After Houdini died on Halloween in 1926, Mackenberg continued her fight against frauds. With World War II came more grieving families and a renewed wave of fake mediums preying on the weak. Mackenberg worked with *Chicago Tribune* reporter E.W. Williamson on a series of articles about the new ghost racket of this time. Mackenberg never stopped her work, but in later years, she expressed a realization that no matter how many articles she wrote, or lecture she gave, people would never give up on trying to communicate with their lost loved ones. And so too, would there always be new leeches living off the blood of those in grief. She truly felt for those who wholeheartedly believed, those too blinded by their grief to see the truth. She wrote, "That otherwise intelligent people should fall for such a racket seems incredible. But you must remember that a mind wracked with grief, reaching out in the literal dark for any solace to a wounded heart, is apt to clutch at the slightest spiritual straw." She also wrote of an actual medium who believed she captured a sea of spirits in a photograph taken at a war memorial service. She wrote, "Poor girl. I can understand how anyone as deeply devoted to her dead father as she is, can desperately hope for the truth of spiritualism."

NICOLE SARANIERO: Biographies and other media about Rose Mackenberg are hard to come by, so we're lucky to have her *Spook Spy* series where she tells of her adventures in her own words. Later, Mackenberg toured the lecture circuits speaking on exposing the tricks of the spiritualist trade. She also continued her detecting on behalf of Chambers of Commerce, newspapers, Better Business Bureaus, and other civic institutions across the United States. She appeared on television for a short interview on CBS's *We the People* in November of 1948, and though I tried really hard, I couldn't get a recording of it. Along with her newspaper columns and exposes, Mackenberg allegedly wrote a manuscript for a book

chronicling her years investigating with Houdini. The final draft of that typewritten manuscript was put up for sale on eBay in 2011, for a mere \$25,000, along with a crystal ball that allegedly belonged to the famous magician. The manuscript was titled, *So You Want to Attend a Seance?* The eBay page no longer exists, but I don't think that item ever sold. The crystal ball allegedly was given by Houdini to Rose, who later passed it along with her manuscript her friend, dancer Virginia Myers. The eBay seller was Meyers' daughter-in-law. Ultimately, the anti-fortune telling bill proposed to Congress and supported by Rose and Houdini did not pass. During the course of their testimony, they called out various Congressmen who they discovered had themselves been attending seances, or otherwise sought the advice of fortune tellers. And while Houdini and Rose found this to be a dangerous practice, the Congressmen didn't seem to take the accusation or the entire situation for that matter, all too seriously.

DANA LEWIS: Tony Wolf, author of *Houdini's Girl Detective, the Real Life Ghostbusting Adventures of Rose Mackenberg* wrote of her, "Rose seems to have been very comfortable with her devoutly skeptical point of view, though she fatalistically came to accept that no matter how many times fake spiritualists were exposed, 'shut eyes' would always pay good money to be fooled. By the 1950s, Mackenberg was still living the life of a self-described 'bachelor'. She was known to keep her New York City apartment well-lit because she had grown tired of sitting in dark rooms. After debunking spiritual fraud for over three decades, she died at the age of 76 on April 10, 1968. Of the few mediums and psychics that have actually presented themselves to be tested in recent years, science has never been able to confirm the powers of a single one. And in the United States alone, the psychic services industry is worth over \$2.2 billion as of 2018. Still, Rose Mackenberg never truly gave up, making an incredibly large and valiant dent in the fraudulent spiritualist movement.

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I was in search of the truth.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Did you ever find it?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I have never found it yet. If I did find it, I would take advantage of my ordination. If I found that spiritualism really developed psychic phenomena, I would be glad to be a spiritualist.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: You never believed it? You never had faith?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: I had faith, but it was never proven.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: What proof would you need so that you might arrive at that point where you would consider yourself an honest spiritualist?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: To my mind, definite proof of psychic phenomena would be if the spiritualists or the mediums could give me some tangible evidence that they do communicate with the spirits on the other side, and give me a message that would really mean something.

NICOLE SARANIERO AS FRANK REID: Are you willing to tell the committee now that your mind is in such condition that you believe that at some time, somewhere, this realization might come to you, and that there was something in spiritualism?

DANA LEWIS AS ROSE MACKENBERG: Yes, I would be glad to say that my mind is wide open. I am not prejudiced either way. (AUDIENCE APPLAUSE AND CHEERS)

SUSAN STONE: Dana Lewis and Nicole Saraniero recorded by Christopher Neil at the Dead Ladies Show NYC in the KGB Bar's Red Room. You know, Rose and other people wrote a lot about her adventures in ghostbusting. But there's achingly little details of her personal life. She never married, but as she told the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in 1937, "I have received messages from 1,000 husbands, and twice as many children in the world to come. Invariably, they told me they were happy where they were, which was not entirely flattering to me." The fraudulent spiritualists Rose targeted didn't only bilk the general population, they often specifically targeted vulnerable women. Widows were fleeced of their savings, but also at times taken advantage of sexually. They were told that relations with male mediums would be purifying, or healing, and if they weren't persuasive, some men turned to force in locked seance rooms. Rose herself was groped and propositioned on several occasions. Harry Houdini advised her to carry a gun to protect herself, but she declined. "It is all cruel, heartless, and shameless," she concluded. Too right, Rose.

If you'd like to learn more about Rose Mackenberg, and see images of her dressed in ghostbusting disguises like 'Vamp from the Country' or 'Topsy Consultant,' and I know you do, drop by our website deadladiesshow.com/podcast or visit our social media channels @deadladiesshow. Dead Ladies Show NYC was launched by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper and it is currently guest-hosted virtually on Zoom -- which means you can watch it wherever you are -- by members of the New York chapter of the Dead Ladies Society. Special thanks to Lori Schwartz, General Manager of the KGB Bar's Red Room. Our jaunty theme song is *Little Lily Swing* by Tri-Tachyon. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me. Thanks, everybody. I'm Susan Stone. Bye from Berlin. Be well.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - *Little Lily Swing* by Tri-Tachyon)

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