

## "On To Chapala" – The Chapala University Movement of the 1920s

by Tony Burton      Published at <https://tonyburton.ca/chapala-history>

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Perhaps the grandest U.S.-funded development plan ever proposed for Lake Chapala was the one launched in 1921 to build a model city and university. The plan was proposed by Dr. Orlando Edgar Miller Ph.D., a traveling lecturer, advocate of New Thought, and president of the International Society of Applied Psychology, headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The timing for the project must have seemed perfect. Growing optimism in the U.S., following the end of the First World War, was coupled with a sense that the revolutionary upheavals in Mexico might finally be drawing to a close. What better way to help your neighbor than by building a model city and important educational center along cooperative principles?



Fig. 1. The proposed city at Lake Chapala, as envisioned by respected California architect Irving J Gill.  
(*The Chapala Round Table*, 1923).

The plan was first mentioned in the press in the *Laredo Weekly Times* in October 1921. Miller, accompanied by his two daughters and private secretary, passed through Laredo on his way to visit a 250,000-acre site at Lake Chapala, which the Mexican government had, he claimed, donated for the purpose. Miller told the newspaper that the International Society of Applied Psychology would

build a great university and a model city of 25,000 people there, operated on a co-operative plan. The paper described Lake Chapala as a place "known to tourists from all parts of the world as the most beautiful spot in all Mexico," and mentioned its "picturesque surroundings" and "numerous opulent chateaus."<sup>1</sup>

A few days later, the Guadalajara daily *El Informador* reported that Miller had arrived in Guadalajara by train in a special carriage from Mexico City, accompanied by Licenciado Victor Rendón, representing the Secretaría de Educación Pública, and Sr. Ernesto Martínez de Alba, an official of the Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento.<sup>2</sup> After meeting with Jalisco state governor Basilio Badillo, the small group left for La Barca to look at the reclaimed land that was earmarked for the project.

By November, Miller was back on his lecture circuit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, debunking the supposed merits of phrenology, a pseudoscience which linked measurements of the skull to character and personality. He was also writing an impassioned speech about Mexico. In an open lecture at Pittsburgh's Memorial Hall on 3 December, he laid out his plans for the Chapala Co-operative University and the City Beautiful where it would be based.<sup>3</sup> The following month, after touring through Mexico as the guest of President Álvaro Obregón, Miller shared more details with the press prior to delivering a series of lectures in Los Angeles.

The proposed university-city would be a modern Utopia. The city would have 25,000 residents and the university—an 'international temple of education'—would serve 10,000 students. The new community would manage more than 250,000 acres of land on a co-operative basis, land that had produced an income of a million dollars yearly before the Revolution. A marble and steel building in Mexico City, begun during Díaz's regime but never completed, would be disassembled and re-erected as the hub of the new university. All classes would be free, but all students would be expected to contribute four hours labor a day to serve the community. The basic premise of an education at Chapala University was that death was "an avoidable accident" and that old age was "a preventable disease."<sup>4</sup> Miller called the project "the greatest educational movement of the twentieth century."

Despite other commitments, which included his role in the Rellimeo Film Syndicate, an educational film company, Miller traveled from city to city in the U.S. over the next few years talking up his plans and generating tremendous support. In Seattle and Portland in 1922, Miller, a tireless and engagingly persuasive orator, revealed that membership shares in the Chapala project were \$1,000 each and that full details should be available within a few months.<sup>5</sup> In late July, Miller moved to Oakland, California, where he gave another series of lectures over several months.

While the narrative changed subtly from one speech to the next, the key elements remained consistent. President Obregón had offered Miller 250,000 acres of land at Lake Chapala for the project. For his part, Miller needed to

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<sup>1</sup> Anon. 1921. "Will Build a University and also start Model City." *Laredo Weekly Times* (Laredo Texas), 16 Oct 1921, 6

<sup>2</sup> *El Informador*, 23 October 1921, 1: [front page]

<sup>3</sup> *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 Dec 1921, 5 (display ad)

<sup>4</sup> *Los Angeles Herald*, Number 49, 28 December 1921.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oregon Daily Journal* (Portland, Oregon) 20 Jun 1922, 11.

raise \$1,000,000 to fund construction via the sale of memberships and shares. In 1923, Miller published *The Chapala Round Table*, a 64-page booklet, largely "reprinted with special permission from the pages of the *The Psychological Review of Reviews*."<sup>6</sup> It included a drawing of the city (Fig 1), as envisioned by respected California architect Irving J Gill, and four small photographs related to the lake.

New Western Headquarters  
International Society  
of Applied Psychology  
Five-Seventy-Seven  
Geary Street,  
SAN FRANCISCO

**INAUGURATION**

The President and Executive Committee, International Society of Applied Psychology, extends an intimation to Members, Students and Disciplinary Followers of the opening of the new Western Headquarters, Five-Seventy-Seven Geary Street, San Francisco, on today, Thursday, October Fourth, 10 A. M. to 4 P. M. o'clock.

Happily coincident and incidental is the Birthday Anniversary of the President Emeritus, Orlando Edgar Miller, Ph.D.

The Committee on Arrangements invites the attendance of Members, Students, Friends and the General Public to an Informal Reception, affording an inspection of the new building and its departmental activities—Rellimeo Film Syndicate, Psychological Review of Reviews, Chapala University Movement, dil Kusha laboratories, Arts and Crafts.

Friends will be received by Dr. Miller in his Study, third floor, from 2 o'clock to 4 o'clock during the afternoon.

**Dr. Alexander Irvine,**  
Chairman.

Divertissement, Madame Luisa  
Clario, Harpist.  
Floral Fete, Gus Corrl.

The end of Obregón's term in office in 1924—coupled with the completion of Rellimeo's first film—led to a slight lull in Miller's Chapala promotional activities. But he was soon back on track, and proclaimed Mexican government support for the project in dozens of lectures across the U.S., from New York and Boston in the east to San Francisco in the west.

In February 1926, Miller took a short sabbatical from oratory to visit Guadalajara and marry one of his associates. Miller was 62; his bride was 27-year-old writer Lillian Granville White, from Lincoln, Nebraska.<sup>7</sup> Miller was in Mexico again later that year trying to finalize details for another Rellimeo movie, *The Daughter of Moctezuma*, which the Mexican government was reportedly interested in financing.

When plans to make that movie fell through, Miller redirected his focus squarely on promoting the Chapala University, and decided that the quickest way to boost interest was to take his fund-raising campaign to Canada. A series of presentations in Winnipeg attracted sufficient attention that it led to the founding of a local support group.<sup>8</sup> Suitably encouraged, Miller applied in Vancouver for his Chapala University Movement to be incorporated as a Society under the Societies Act of British Columbia, a status granted on 4 May 1928.<sup>9</sup>

Fig 2. Inauguration of Irvine and Miller's multi-purpose San Francisco Offices, October 1923.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Orlando Edgar Miller & Alexander Irvine (eds). 1923. [The Chapala Round Table, Vol 1, #1 \(November 1923\)](#). [link is to copy archived by The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals.]

<sup>7</sup> The couple married in Guadalajara on 8 February 1926. White's book *The Star of Destiny: the story of Napoleon & Josephine* was published in San Francisco in 1924.

<sup>8</sup> The Winnipeg Tribune, Canada, 11 February 1928, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Government Gazette, British Columbia, Vol. LXVIII. 17 May 1928.

<sup>10</sup> San Francisco Bulletin: 4 October 1923, 21. (Miller's 59th birthday)

The stated aims of the Chapala University Movement, as incorporated in British Columbia in 1928 were:

**The aims of the Chapala University Movement:**

The objects of the Society are:-

(a) For the mutual improvement of our members, physically, mentally, and spiritually:

(b) For the study of man as a physical entity, from the standpoint of anatomy, physiology, chemistry, dietetics, eugenics, and physical culture:

(c) For the study of man as an intelligent entity, from the standpoint of mind-reaction or psychology; the conscious, subconscious, and super-conscious phases of mind ; character analysis and vocational guidance:

(d) For the study of man as a spiritual being, from the standpoint of emotional, superstitious, and religious manifestations, as revealed in His sacred and religious expressions or writings; the gaining of personal experimental experiences in the proper application of the technique of the Silence, as taught and practised by Orlando Edgar Miller:

(e) For the health, happiness, success, prosperity, and achievement of our members and friends:

(f) For the conducting of meetings, lectures, excursions, outings, reading-rooms, moving-picture theatres, gymnasiums, pure-food restaurants, and any and everything of proven value that will contribute to the health, strength, vitality, energy, longevity, happiness, and success of our members, and to promote and lend such assistance as lies in our power to such schools, colleges, and universities as will include in their curriculum the above phases of human education :

(g) To acquire, print, publish, conduct, and circulate or otherwise deal with newspapers, magazines, or other publications:

(h) To purchase, take on lease, hire, or otherwise acquire, and also to let, lease, or dispose of, any premises or other property for the purposes of the Association, and to erect, if necessary, any buildings for such purposes; to appoint trustees to hold lands of any tenure for the purposes of the Association.<sup>11</sup>

On Saturday 18 May 1928 the Chapala University Movement held a celebratory "silver tea" fund raiser in the American Women's club-rooms in Winnipeg.<sup>12</sup> Despite the enthusiasm, this tea party turned out to be the last hurrah of the Lake Chapala super-city plan.

However, before we consider why, and what happened next, let's back up a little and take a closer look at how Miller's earlier life, qualifications and employment had led him, in 1921, to propose a Chapala University.

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<sup>11</sup> Government Gazette, British Columbia, Vol. LXVIII. 17 May 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Winnipeg Tribune, 18 May 1928, 11.

### Early life and Denver, 1886-1896

Orlando Edgar Miller was born into a German-English family in the small village of Arcadia, Ohio, on 4 October 1864. Little is known for sure about his childhood and early education, though this may be when he first heard about Lake Chapala. Students in his home state of Ohio in the 1870s were certainly expected in their examinations to be able to "Locate Lake Chapala."<sup>13</sup>

As for employment, Miller was a clerk in Colorado, teacher in Kansas, and book-keeper in Emporia, Denver, before "cutting short his medical studies" because "the profession was too crowded with general practitioners."

Having apparently decided that conventional jobs and wages were not his forte—and certainly not the quickest way to make money—Miller's first step toward financial independence began in 1886 when he moved to Denver and started the O. E. Miller Hernia Treatment Company. Within five years the company was incorporated, with a paid-up capital of \$250,000, and had several branch offices. By 1892, Miller's chain of clinics, and sale of rights for other regions, had netted him an estimated \$1,000,000, with one journal lauding him for his "pluck, confidence, brain and absolute integrity."<sup>14</sup>

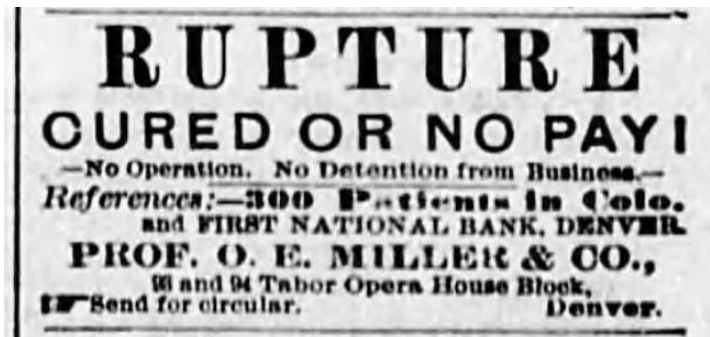


Fig. 3. Advertisement for rupture 'cure.' (The Delta Independent, Colorado: 12 March 1889, 4)

Unfortunately, Miller was also guilty of writing fraudulent bank checks in Denver to the tune of \$125,000. When the 1893 banking crisis hit, Miller's 'loans' brought down the Commercial National Bank, one of the largest in the city, and Miller was convicted (along with a bank president and a bank employee) as an accessory to the misapplication of national banking funds. He was sentenced to ten years in the federal penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Luckily for Miller, this conviction was overturned on a technicality after he had served only a short time.<sup>15</sup>

### Chicago and St. Luke's, 1898-1902

In 1898, shortly after his release from prison, he married Rose Elizabeth Boydston (1876-?). The couple moved to Chicago, where their three children were born: Frances in 1900, Ruth (later a Hollywood starlet) in 1903 and William in 1907.

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<sup>13</sup> Highland County Board of Examiners. Examination Questions, 1 November 1879, reprinted in The Highland Weekly News (Hillsborough, Ohio) 6 November 1879.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Dudley Teetor. 1891. "Successful Young Men in the West." Magazine of Western History (New York), Vol. 14 #3 (July 1891), 306-308.

<sup>15</sup> St. Louis Post-Dispatch (St. Louis, Missouri) 07 Jan 1921, 3.



The U.S. Census for 1900 listed Miller as living in Chicago with his wife and mother. Only a few months later, he was declared bankrupt, unable to repay debts of \$586,943 that stemmed from the banking collapse in Denver.<sup>16</sup>

In Chicago, Miller first tried his luck selling a patent medicine (in actuality pellets of washed sand) that he recommended for almost every condition, and in advocating an "earth cure" in which patients walked on hands and knees. Miller then founded St. Luke's, a religious and philanthropic society in Chicago offering treatment for drug and alcohol addiction. Miller was still in charge of St. Luke's, which had more than 100 patients in its care at the time, in 1902, when more than a dozen patients (some shackled to their beds) died when the former hotel which was the society's sanatorium was destroyed in a fire.<sup>17</sup> Miller and several others were lucky to receive only a coroner's censure.

### **Ruskin University, 1903-1905**

Miller's next venture was running a sanatorium attached to Ruskin University in Glen Ellyn, a suburb of Chicago. The university president was George McAnelly Miller (apparently not a relative despite the coincidence of surname). Startlingly, every single one of the seven individuals named in the university's brochure had the same surname! They included George's wife, Adaline, and three of their children. The institution, which espoused co-operative values and even had its own internal currency,<sup>18</sup> operated in Glen Ellyn from 1903 to 1907, before moving to Ruskin, Florida.

Orlando Miller was the General Secretary and taught Eugenics and Sanitary Science. Perhaps this is when he conferred a degree of Ph.D. on himself? He opened an all-embracing College of Medicine, where students "will receive instruction in every known process of healing, whether it goes under the name regular, irregular, allopathic, eclectic, homeopathic, physio-medical, osteopathic, hydropathic, or any other title." The college offered two-year training for nurses. The college's sanatorium advertised that it treated "drug addicts, nervous cases, rheumatic and kidney troubles," making good use of "The famous Glen Ellyn mineral springs and mud baths."<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps Miller first heard about Chapala's similarly bountiful, health-giving thermal water, while working at Glen Ellyn? As early as 1885, Lake Chapala was described at a U.S. medical conference as being a "paradise for consumptives. It is about five thousand feet above the level of the sea, the temperature of the lake being even the entire year, the variation being only about fifteen degrees summer and winter. There is very little wind."<sup>20</sup> Two years later, Lake Chapala was included in a handbook of medical climatology that identified the world's chief health resorts.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The New York Times, 1 June 1901, 1.

<sup>17</sup> The Inter Ocean (Chicago, Illinois) 11 Jun 1902, 1,2

<sup>18</sup> C. W. Knudson. 1909. "Nostrums and quackery: International Institute for the Treatment of Tuberculosis", Journal of the American Medical Association, 19 January 1909; reprinted, with modifications, in Knudson, 1936, Nostrums and Quackery, Articles on the Nostrum Evil and Quackery.

<sup>19</sup> Chicago Medical Directory, 1904.

<sup>20</sup> Ella D. Goff. 1895. "Consumptives' Health Resort for the Entire Year (All Seasons)" in In the Transactions of the Homeopathic Medical Society, State of Pennsylvania, 30<sup>th</sup>. Held at Philadelphia, September 18, 19, 20, 1894, p 168.

<sup>21</sup> S. Edwin Solly. 1897. A Handbook of Medical Climatology. Lea Brothers & Co., Philadelphia and New York.

By the time Ruskin University ran into financial troubles and closed its doors, Orlando Miller had already moved on, forced out by local residents' opposition to having a drug treatment program in the midst of their community. Following the death of a young woman 'student'—a cocaine addict who took her own life by throwing herself in front of a train—the Chicago Health Board claimed that Miller had practiced medicine without a license, and the local town council gave Miller ten days to leave town.<sup>22</sup>

### **International Institute for Treatment of Tuberculosis, 1905-1909**

Emboldened by having managed a university sanatorium, Miller founded the International Institute for the Treatment of Tuberculosis, which lasted from about 1905 to 1909. This time, rather than running his own hospital, Miller arranged for patients to be 'treated' at the Chicago Union Hospital using "a combination of purely vegetable substances." Almost certainly, Miller's secret ingredient was the same hallucinogenic drug he would later use elsewhere: hyoscine (or scopolamine), derived from plants of the nightshade family. Patients paid a minimum treatment fee of \$250, plus \$25 a week for hospital expenses.

Miller's ideas about how to treat tuberculosis (or consumption as it was often called at the time), and his claims of an 80% success rate, were ripped to shreds in 1909 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.<sup>23</sup> An exhaustive investigation by a Dr. Knudson showed that Miller's methods and claims were entirely false. As Chicago authorities closed in, Miller left the city. His attempt to introduce the same treatment methods in New York failed because physicians at the Metropolitan Hospital were already familiar with the bogus doctor.<sup>24</sup> Miller and his family left the U.S. in 1910 for Europe.

### **Paris and London, 1910-1919**

Miller initially tried to interest doctors in Paris in his cure for consumption before moving to London where he was introduced to the Duke of Manchester, who he treated for "nerves." The Duke "was so enthralled with the visions he saw that he became a firm believer."<sup>25</sup>

The timing of their friendship could not have been better. The Duke's wife, the former Helena Zimmerman of Cincinnati, was the only child of Eugene Zimmerman, a wealthy, self-made railroad and oil magnate. Helena and the Duke, like many members of the London smart set at the time, were Theosophists, and wanted to set up a theosophical hospital for body and soul.<sup>26</sup> When they found the perfect building and grounds—Spring Grove House, the former Pears estate at Isleworth,<sup>27</sup> just outside London—they persuaded Helena's father to fund the first year, and contracted Miller to oversee the hospital's medical work, with Charles Pilenas as the institution's business manager.

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<sup>22</sup> The Inter Ocean (Chicago, Illinois) 16 Jul 1904, 1, 3.

<sup>23</sup> C. W. Knudson. 1909. "Nostrums and quackery: International Institute for the Treatment of Tuberculosis", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 19 January 1909.

<sup>24</sup> New York World, May 4, 1911.

<sup>25</sup> The Tennessean (Nashville, Tennessee), 30 June 1912, 39: "Our Duchess of Manchester's Soul Hospital."

<sup>26</sup> The Tennessean (Nashville, Tennessee) 30 June 1912, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Spring Grove House was also originally the home of the famous botanist Sir Joseph Banks, who sailed with Captain James Cook.

Isleworth hospital opened in 1912. It was most definitely not an altruistic venture. Treatments were expensive and patients were charged according to their means. Glowing newspaper write-ups reported how rich and aristocratic patients had been "cured" of nerves and addictions. Many reported visions, and some believed they had eaten elaborate dinners without touching any food.

Shortly after the hospital opened, and presumably to shake off former creditors, Miller declared bankruptcy again.<sup>28</sup> On passport applications, he listed his occupation as lecturer and healer, and claimed he represented the "American International New Thought Alliance of Washington, D.C."

The hospital quickly ran into problems. The chronically-insolvent Duke decided to withdraw his funding. Disillusioned business manager Pilenas resigned, told tales to the newspapers, and sued the Duke in 1913 for having misrepresented the nature of the enterprise. Pilenas claimed it was not a genuine hospital, but that all the strange goings-on involving musical comedy actresses and chorus girls had caused it to be called the "abode of love."<sup>29</sup>

The following year, the police were called in to investigate the death of a young girl in the 'hospital' following an injection administered by Miller. Kate Scott had suffered paralysis for 15 years. The inquest into her death was told that she had paid five guineas a week for treatment. Miller admitted injecting her with scopolamine—described at the Old Bailey as "one of the most powerful narcotic poisons known"—was found guilty of manslaughter, and sentenced to three months in jail.<sup>30</sup>

Even though they parted ways, Miller continued to boast about his connections to the Duke of Manchester, and continued for some time to use Spring Grove House as his address on passport applications. And his later choice of Chapala as the site for his model city-university scheme may well have been prompted by their friendship. The Duke and his wife had visited Chapala in 1905, and again in 1910, when the Duke donated the main trophy for the Chapala Yacht Club's regatta.<sup>31</sup>

After his release from prison, Miller remained in London with his wife and children, eking out a living from lecturing and (presumably) from the sale of quack remedies, while under the guise of working for the International New Thought Alliance. In 1915 his focus shifted squarely to the spiritual and metaphysical. He advertised "The Miller Institute Ltd.", calling it a "famous health home and school" and started publishing *Mastery*, a monthly magazine devoted to the Living of the "New Life".<sup>32</sup> For sixpence a month (about 12 cents U.S.), readers received a cornucopia of quasi-religious articles about all aspects of life.

Miller's eponymous institute offered "the third annual session of the New Life Summer School" at Spring Grove House in 1915, with four weeks of instruction

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<sup>28</sup> The Edinburgh Gazette, 19 July 1912, reporting a listing in the London Gazette.

<sup>29</sup> San Francisco Call, Volume 114, Number 127, 10 October 1913. Chicago Tribune (Chicago, Illinois) 11 Oct 1913, 5.

<sup>30</sup> The Guardian (London, England) 11 June 1914, 9; 22 October 1914, 7. The 'hospital' was closed; it reopened as a regular hospital during the first world war.

<sup>31</sup> St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri) 19 March 1905, 26; El Paso Herald, 9 April 1910, 23.

<sup>32</sup> "Mastery - a Monthly Magazine devoted to the Living of the New Life", June 1915.



about "practical training in applied metaphysics and psychology, advanced physical culture, music, and social science." Miller, as principal, conducted classes in "The Subjective Mind and its Training," and in "The Attainment of Cosmic Consciousness."

It is unclear whether this was a financial success. Miller applied for an emergency U.S. passport in October 1915, followed by a regular passport in November, but it is unclear whether he ever used either of these passports to cross the Atlantic. According to the applications, Miller claimed exemption from paying U.S. income tax because his income was less than £4,000 a year.

On 5 September 1916, Miller obtained another emergency passport, claiming he planned to attend the New Thought convention in Chicago. Miller and his mother (who had been living with him in London) were both initially listed on the passenger list for the *S.S. Lapland* which left Liverpool the following day bound for New York, but their names were subsequently erased, meaning they never actually caught the ship.

Shortly afterwards, Miller's wife, who had last visited the U.S. in 1914, applied for her own passport, with her husband signing to testify to her identity. Rose Miller took her mother-in-law back to America in 1916 and helped her resettle, before returning to London aboard the *St. Louis* which sailed from New York on 6 January 1917.

In 1917, Miller's book *Within the Holy of Holies; Or, Attitudes of Attainment* was published using the pen name of Rellimeo (O.E. Miller backwards) by L. N. Fowler. Fowler had previously (1911) published Miller's *An explanation of Psychic Phenomena: The More Excellent Way* under the same pseudonym.

The family's remaining time in England appears to have been relatively uneventful. After the end of the first world war, when they decided to return to the U.S., Miller went on ahead. He obtained a new passport in London on 2 January 1919 and arrived in New York on 31 January aboard the *S.S. Adriatic*. Rose and the three children remained in London until the children finished school, and traveled to the U.S. in July.

### **USA and Chapala University, 1919-1928**

Back in his homeland, Miller started the International Society of Applied Psychology and made his living by giving lecture series. In order for his teachings to reach more people, he published a series of books in 1920 and began the Rellimeo film syndicate. The books included *Reincarnation: Religious Freedom* (1920); *Mastery* (Chicago: Mastery Publishing Co, 1920) and *The Last Word Series: Friendship* (Rellimeo, 1920).

In December 1920, Miller started a series of applied psychology lectures in St. Louis, Missouri. Within weeks, authorities ordered him to stop because they had received information from the American Medical Association about Miller's past, in particular his short stay in Fort Leavenworth.<sup>33</sup>

By March, Miller had moved to Cincinnati, where he lectured for several weeks on such topics as "Scientific Sex and Eugenics." That particular lecture was delivered twice in an afternoon: first to a female-only audience and then to men.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> St. Louis Post-Dispatch (St. Louis, Missouri) 07 Jan 1921, 3.

<sup>34</sup> The Journal News (Hamilton, Ohio), 25 Mar 1921, 2.

This brings us full circle back to the launch of Miller's Chapala University plan, first announced in October 1921. If Miller's choice of Chapala was not due to his early education, or his friendship with the Duke of Manchester, or his knowledge of thermal waters, perhaps he had read and been sufficiently intrigued by Charles Embree's 1900 novel *Dream of a Throne*, the story of a Mexican Revolt, which is set at Lake Chapala?

Given his dubious background, how was it possible that Miller was able to keep the Chapala scheme alive for so long without people catching on that—like so many of his earlier schemes—it was fraudulent?



Reporters at the *Los Angeles Times* were immediately sceptical. They contacted President Obregón, and received a polite telegram denying that the Mexican government had made any land grant to the project.

After the paper published the exchange of telegrams, Miller went on record to claim that a Mexican official had demanded \$12,000 for a service worth less than \$3,000, and still hoped for a "pay-off." The Mexican consul in Los Angeles, Gustavo Luders de Negri, stepped into the fray and angrily demanded that Miller name the official or officials involved.<sup>35</sup> Miller chose to leave town, and moved up the coast to work Seattle and Portland.

Fig. 4. Miller is Asked to Prove It. (*Los Angeles Times*, 31 January 1922, 12)

In Portland, Miller admitted that "The grant of land has not yet been received from the Mexican government and the plan for the operation of the colony has not been fully worked out."<sup>36</sup> He was followed to Portland by a rival applied psychology advocate, Mrs Patricia E Reid, who made such a stink that the local mayor denied Miller the use of the city auditorium.<sup>37</sup> Miller lectured at the Peoples theater instead, with Reid holding her own lectures denouncing Miller elsewhere. Despite the opposition, Miller was sufficiently convincing that he signed up new supporters.

The following year (1923), an update in the Spanish language U.S. paper *El Tucsonense* on the level of international support for Miller's project, probably seeded by Miller himself, claimed that "a great International University, financed by all nations, has suffered a cruel blow." It claimed that the Italian government had prohibited its citizens from investing because it did not want Italian money to leave the country, and that Miller planned to offer additional shares in the U.S. to replace the million dollars that would have come from Italy.<sup>38</sup>

#### **Rellimeo film syndicate**

Meanwhile, the Rellimeo film syndicate was giving Miller several headaches. He began the company in 1922 with Lillian Granville White and H. De Elva. Even

<sup>35</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 31 January 1922, 12. "Miller is Asked to Prove it".

<sup>36</sup> *The Oregon Daily Journal* (Portland, Oregon) 20 Jun 1922, 11.

<sup>37</sup> *The Oregon Daily Journal*, 6 Jul 1922, 6.

<sup>38</sup> *El Tucsonense*, 30 Jan 1923, 1.

before the release of its first movie, Miller was ordered to repay investors because he had failed to raise the necessary million dollars in capital by the deadline for selling stock.<sup>39</sup> Miller was entitled to keep 20% for promotional expenses but had to pay back the remaining 80% unless the shareholders voted him an extension. Authorities thought Miller had sold \$200,000 worth of shares, but the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Miller had actually sold shares worth \$800,000.

Despite all this, the company succeeded in releasing several films—*Heart Strings* (1923),<sup>40</sup> *Defying Destiny* (1923), *Pagan Passions* (1924) and *The Bowery Bishop* (1924)—though none of them could be described as educational. The only film that still survives is *Defying Destiny*, a tale about class divides in the small town of Riverdale. Written by Grace Sanderson Mitchie and directed by Louis William Chaudet, it was a “well-staged” high quality production that was favorably received.<sup>41</sup>



Mitchie also wrote *Pagan Passions* (1924), a tale of relationship woes set partly in China. Originally called *Yellow Stigma*, it was the subject of a \$250,000 law suit a few years later, when the story rights were claimed by John Harwood Bacon, an American writer then residing in Paris, France, who claimed the movie was pirated from his story “The Yellow Stigma”, published in 1907.<sup>42</sup>

Rellimeo’s third film was *The Bowery Bishop*, a tale of passion, centered on the rival affections for the mother of an illegitimate child. This screenplay was written by James A. Macdonald, one of Miller's fellow confidence tricksters, and better known as Colonel John R. Stingo, the Honest Rainmaker.

Macdonald later recalled his ‘associate’ (Miller) with remarkable good humor and a large number of wonderful anecdotes, including the memorable line that Miller “drew Tease from the repentant like soda through a straw,” where Tease refers to ‘T’s or treasury notes.

Fig. 5. Promotion for *Pagan Passions*. (Chicago Tribune, 14 June 1924, 14)

Macdonald helped Miller identify suitable marks, and witnessed first-hand how he compiled extensive mailing lists for every city he visited. Miller was a pioneer of list exchanges: “When we swapped towns with another big preacher,

<sup>39</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Aug 1922, 19.

<sup>40</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*: 16 May 1923, 6. This 8-reel psychological drama, absent from most online lists, was first screened in San Francisco; its cast included Monte Blue, Irene Rich, Trully Marshall, Jackie Saunders, Russell Simpson and Ford Sterling.

<sup>41</sup> National Film Preservation Foundation. Undated. “Defying Destiny (1923)” <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/defying-destiny-1923> [3 March 2018]. This film is freely available on the Internet.

<sup>42</sup> (a) *The Los Angeles Times*: 5 February 1928, 7. (b) Joe Moore, in a comment dated 27 Oct 2010 at <https://silentcomedymafia.com/viewtopic.php?t=432&start=10> cites his source as *Camera* Vol. 6 No. 25 p. 6.

like Dr. Hall the hundred-dollar-Bible man, we sometimes swapped mailing lists. But we would always keep out a few selected prospects, and so, I suspect, would the other prophet."<sup>43</sup>

Despite the distractions, Miller published (or more accurately self-published) several more books during this period, including *The Man of Galilee: The Man, the Mission, the Message* (1923), *My Answer to the Attack of the A.M.A.* (1924), *Joy is perfection* (1925), and *The Book of Life, The Bible of Health* (1925).

### Grand Jury in Boston

As Miller continued promoting his Lake Chapala scheme, the press and authorities in other jurisdictions began to take note. When he tried his luck to push *The Chapala Round Table* in Santa Barbara, California, in August 1924, for example, the local *Morning Press* splashed his past across its front page, warning readers against offering him any financial support whatsoever, with headers such as "Flaws in Miller's Record Again Are Revealed," "Unpaid Bills and Worthless Check Brought to Light," "'Doctor' Drops Title of 'Ph.D.' After Source of Origin Uncovered," and "Here Are Some High Spots in Miller's Career."<sup>44</sup> Miller quickly moved on, but his luck was starting to run out.

Shortly after he gave a series of lectures at Manhattan Opera House in January 1925,<sup>45</sup> a grand jury was convened in Boston to probe into the Chapala Movement as it was known.<sup>46</sup> Witnesses testified that Miller had claimed that the property had already been purchased and that colonising would begin as soon as \$1,000,000 was raised. The *San Bernardino County* added that the grand jury was also investigating the 'treatment' of would-be colonizers who were strapped into a hammock which was then swung vigorously to 'loop the loop'. This loopy \$20 procedure, it was claimed, would lengthen the vertebrae and ensure a longer, happier life. The model city in Chapala was designed to house only the very finest of people, to be a city of super-men (and women):

"As announced, the plan was to develop by psychological evolution a race of men that would be enabled to carry on the work of the world by but three hours' labor a day, and through them to develop world leaders."

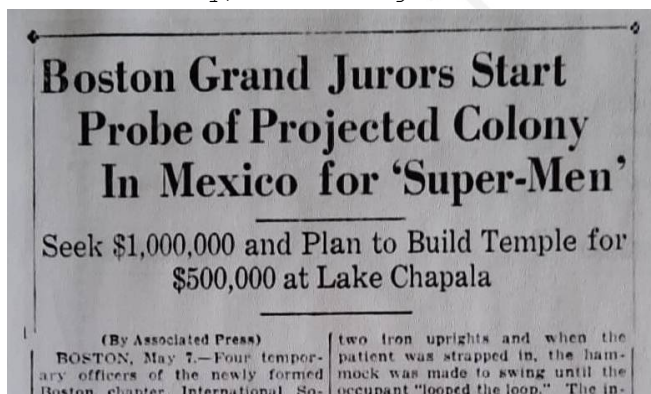


Fig. 6. Boston Grand Jury. (San Bernardino County Sun, 8 May 1925.)

<sup>43</sup> A. J. Liebling. 1953. *The honest rainmaker: the life and times of Colonel John R. Stingo*. San Francisco: North Point Press. (Chapter 11 is about Miller.)

<sup>44</sup> *The Morning Press* (Santa Barbara): 22 August 1924, 1; 24 August 1924, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Daily Sentinel* (Rome, NY), 7 May 1925; *The San Bernadino County*, 8 May 1925.

<sup>46</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 31 Jan 1925, 10.

Remarkably, despite all the evidence and fortunately for Miller, the Boston grand jury eventually decided not to recommend any drastic sanctions.

Miller's Rellimeo problems, though, were not going to blow over quite so quickly. Angry shareholders demanded a formal investigation into the syndicate's finances.

This appears to be the point where Miller decided to marry Lillian Granville White, who knew all about Rellimeo's activity, and whose testimony in court might prove to be disastrous for him. As a married couple, each could claim spousal privilege and refuse to incriminate either themselves or each other. In their marriage document before a Guadalajara notary, both Miller and White professed themselves to be 'single.' It remains unclear whether or not Miller's first wife, Rose Miller, had already died, or whether Miller married White in Guadalajara to avoid complications and make it more difficult to allege or prove bigamy.<sup>47</sup>

Six months after the marriage, the first Rellimeo official, an 'F. Ellis Miller' (no relation to our villain), was arrested and charged with embezzlement.<sup>48</sup> In his defence, F. Ellis Miller claimed that Orlando Miller, the one responsible for his problems, had told him that he had gone to Mexico City in connection with a film, provisionally titled *The Daughter of Montezuma*, for which the Mexican government was to pay \$100,000, but that he later learned that Orlando Miller's representations concerning the film were false. The newspaper reminded its readers that this was the same Orlando Edgar Miller who "was once arrested on a charge of practising medicine without a license and tried in police court in San Francisco. Fashionably attired women followers cheered when he was acquitted."<sup>49</sup>

In September 1926, F. Ellis Miller agreed he had been the treasurer of the film syndicate but argued that it was Orlando Miller who had ruined his own company by failing to keep any financial records prior to when he was asked to do so in 1923. He accused both Orlando Miller and Lillian Granville White of selling many shares without accounting for the proceeds.

California state prosecutors finally decided they had sufficient evidence to take action, and issued warrants in February 1928 for company president Miller, his wife Lillian Granville White, treasurer F. Ellis Miller and for F. G. Corlette, described as the "personal representative of the self-styled psychologist." All four individuals were accused of mail fraud.<sup>50</sup>

*The Oakland Tribune* reported that 'Dr' Orlando Miller was believed to be in Mexico.<sup>51</sup> Actually, it turns out, Miller and his wife had already fled in the opposite direction: to Canada.

Miller's prior misdeeds appear to have escaped the notice of friendly Canadians, at least until they were alerted to them by furious American shareholders. Miller chose Winnipeg for his next crowd-pleasing rodeo. Quickly back in the saddle, Miller gave lectures there about applied psychology while

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<sup>47</sup> When Miller (an 'education professor' aged 62) and Lillian Granville White (aged 37) married in Guadalajara on 9 February 1926, both claimed to be 'single.' The witnesses included Percy Grenville Holms, the British Vice-Consul in Guadalajara.


<sup>48</sup> *Oakland Tribune*, 11 Aug 1926, 32.

<sup>49</sup> *Oakland Tribune*, 11 Aug 1926, 32.

<sup>50</sup> *Woodland Daily Democrat* (Woodland, California), 4 Feb 1928, 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Oakland Tribune*, 4 February 1928, 1.

THE  
SCIENCE  
OF  
HEALTH



THE  
SCIENCE  
OF  
SUCCESS

**ORLANDO EDGAR MILLER, Ph.D.**  
 Founder, the Chapala University Movement, of  
 New York and London, Eng.

BEGINS A TWO WEEKS' SERIES OF FREE LECTURES  
 on  
**THE FINE ART OF LIVING**  
 Monday Evening, February 13, at 8.00 p.m.  
**WALKER THEATRE**

Dr. Edward H. Emmett (Pastor of Manhattan Congregational Church of New York), says:—

- ¶ After hearing this man once you can never be the same again. He is a mental steam engine in evening dress. He will make you think, and once you **THINK FOR YOURSELF** you change failure into success.
- ¶ He touches every point in the entire compass of human need. It may look a little foolish in print but he can show you how to grow brains. If you are a victim of physical ill-being he can liberate you from pain. If your mind is disordered or your nerves frayed or out of order he can give you poise. He can show how to solve domestic and conjugal problems.
- ¶ He is an orator, a philosopher, a prophet, a business man.
- ¶ Imitation is a form of flattery. He has scores of imitators. He is original, the dynamic force in Applied Psychology.
- ¶ He will show you how to increase your health by one hundred per cent, and by the same process reduce your living expenses seventy-five per cent.
- ¶ Well, that's what Dr. Miller does. Follow the crowd and hear him. No charge for Admission. Everybody is welcome. Don't miss this extraordinary chance to rejuvenate your mind, body and soul.

NO CHARGE FOR ADMISSION

billing himself as the "Founder of the Chapala University Movement" with a promise to "straighten you out, no matter what your kinks may be."<sup>52</sup>

In March, Miller survived an immigration hearing in Vancouver by arguing that his previous conviction and prison term in Kansas had been overturned on appeal.<sup>53</sup> He resumed his speaking engagements in Winnipeg. When immigration officials there, acting on a tip-off, re-examined his criminal record, Miller returned to Vancouver to legalize the paperwork of his Lake Chapala Movement support group.<sup>54</sup>

Even when Winnipeg officials finally declared him an undesirable visitor and gave him 10 days to leave the country,<sup>55</sup> they were so gentlemanly (or misguided) that they allowed Miller to choose his preferred point of departure, asking only that he notify them on leaving. Needless to say, Miller did not reciprocate their kindness.<sup>56</sup> He and his wife slipped out of the country and went on the run to enjoy a self-imposed exile, mainly in France.

Fig. 7. Advertisement for Miller's free talks (Winnipeg Tribune, 9 February 1928).

## Justice, 1934

It was six years before Miller returned to New York. As he stepped off the Red Star liner *Westernland* on 28 May 1934, he was immediately arrested and escorted to California to stand trial.<sup>57</sup> The collapse of the Rellimeo film company was estimated to have cost investors \$1,000,000.<sup>58</sup> Among other items, the indictment charged that Miller promoted stock sales, falsely representing that he controlled a "non-flickering apparatus" that would "revolutionize the motion picture industry."

At his trial in October, a stream of investors told of losing their life savings in Miller's Rellimeo and Chapala schemes, with some testifying that,

<sup>52</sup> The Winnipeg Tribune, 11 February 1928, 3.

<sup>53</sup> The Winnipeg Tribune, 14 February 1928, 1; Reno Gazette-Journal (Reno, Nevada) 30 Mar 1928, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Government Gazette, British Columbia, Vol. LXVIII, 17 May 1928.

<sup>55</sup> The Winnipeg Tribune, 29 June 1928, 1; 06 July 1928, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Oakland Tribune, 11 July 1928, 10.

<sup>57</sup> The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Brooklyn, New York) 28 May 1934, 2; San Francisco Examiner, 29 May 1934.

<sup>58</sup> The Los Angeles Times, 29 May 1934, 3.



in his psychology lectures, Miller had promised returns of 100% within two to three years. The majority of shareholders were women, many were elderly and some infirm.<sup>59</sup> Testimony from I. N. Nobel, appointed by shareholders as their financial agent for the motion picture *The Daughter of Montezuma*, was especially damning. Nobel explained how Miller had made false claims about paying a Mexican official for permits before admitting that he had spent \$12,000 of company money on unauthorized personal expenses.<sup>60</sup> Expert witnesses from the University of California attacked Miller's supposed credentials as a psychologist. One of them, Dr. Dorothy Yates, had written about Miller in her book *Psychological Racketeers*, published while Miller was on the lam, in which she described his magnetic stage presence:

"I can see him now as he stood before his audience. His appearance was commanding: a head well set on broad shoulders; a well-featured countenance seeming to radiate strength and benevolence; a figure not tall but giving that impression because of superb carriage. His air of absolute self-confidence was flawless. Especially notable was his voice, a full-toned, vibrant voice that drew his listeners to him as if he had been a prophet of old... The deep cadences of his many scriptural quotations, the ringing eloquence of his exhortations, the volume and power of his 'affirmations,' were, to the great majority, irresistibly convincing."<sup>61</sup>

Miller was found guilty and sentenced to six years in a federal penitentiary for his part in the Rollimeo fiasco, but not a single day for his fraudulent scheme to bilk his admiring minions out of their life savings to fund a model city at Lake Chapala, a city that never existed outside the deepest, darkest recesses of his fertile, warped mind.<sup>62</sup>

One local paper summarized the final scenes in court:

"Women admirers of the 75-year-old lecturer openly prayed during the closing sessions of the trial and sought to sympathize with him after he was convicted for what Deputy U. S. Attorney Valentine C. Hammack described as 'the greatest fraud ever brought to the attention of the Federal Court in San Francisco.'"<sup>63</sup>

Miller, who had reported earnings some years of \$175,000, was penniless and unable to afford an appeal.<sup>64</sup> On 20 December he was transferred to serve his time at McNeill Island Federal Penitentiary, near Seattle.

And what of the others accused alongside Miller? His wife, Lillian Granville White, remained on the run. F. Ellis Miller died of a heart attack mid-way through giving evidence at the trial. F. G. Corlette was tried separately.

Little is known about Miller's life after his release, except that he returned to New York, where he applied in 1940 for joint copyright, with Susan Jessie Smith, of a dramatic work entitled *Margaret Manville, Jr.* written by Smith and based on Miller's novel, *Margaret Manville, superwoman*. Nothing more is known

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<sup>59</sup> Oakland Tribune, 17 October 1934, 17; 26 October 1934, 41.

<sup>60</sup> Oakland Tribune, 26 October 1934, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Yates. 1932. *Psychological Racketeers*. Chapter 9 is about Miller.

<sup>62</sup> Oakland Tribune, 9 Nov 1934, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Oakland Tribune, 9 Nov 1934, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Oakland Tribune, 9 Nov 1934, 1.

about either the novel or the joint play. Smith, who copyrighted several dramatic works between 1934 and 1961, adopted the name Susan Jessie Smith-Miller for her later works such as *Narcissus, a romantic farce in two acts* (1959).

Orlando Miller died in Manhattan on 7 April 1947.

His wife, Lillian Granville White, remained in Europe until 1941. On her return to the U.S., after 13 years on the run, she turned herself in, but prosecutors decided to drop the case against her since it no longer served any useful purpose.<sup>65</sup>

White had been trapped in Belgium when the Germans invaded, and had to endure terrible conditions before managing to get a berth on a train to Paris and make her way back to America from Portugal. She shared her experiences at a series of informal talks in her home town of Lincoln, Nebraska to raise funds for the Red Cross, and was reportedly writing a book about her war-time life.<sup>66</sup> It appears unlikely she ever renewed relations with her husband.

## Conclusion

Miller was an intelligent, enthusiastic, diligent, creative and dynamic individual, the perfect combination to become an extraordinary confidence trickster. Over an eight-year period, he successfully garnered donations for his Chapala University project, one of the longest-running cons of the time, from enthusiastic sympathizers, many of them vulnerable and elderly. Somehow the sly, silver-tongued fox—a mix of faith healer, con man, womanizer and repeat bankrupt—convinced supporters that his Chapala project was much more than just a concept created by his fertile imagination.

To some extent, Miller's activities were a product of their time. In an age when relatively few people had access to out-of-state newspapers, any exposé of previous misdeeds usually remained at least one step behind him. Whenever things got hot, Miller moved on to continue his endeavors in a new jurisdiction.

Many of the ways by which he raised funds were entirely legal. There were no laws against bewitching crowds at evangelical meetings, soliciting donations in exchange for lectures, or offering "faith healing" to those in need. And, while he was certainly not a qualified medical doctor and his Ph.D. was self-awarded, Miller never used a false name when persuading people to part with their cash. He was sufficiently brazen to use his real name despite prior exposure elsewhere as a fraud. The unraveling of his complex web of deceit may have been delayed for years had it not been for the legal challenges launched by shareholders in his film syndicate—ironically one of the few ventures which was at least partially successful.

Miller was not the first to propose a large-scale resettlement of Americans to Lake Chapala. In 1899, mining engineer W. J. Lyons, a confidante of President Porfirio Díaz, had tried to engineer a massive land transfer which would have seen several thousand Creek Indians give up their share in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), and move to the lake.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The San Bernardino County Sun, 07 May 1941, 16.

<sup>66</sup> The Lincoln Star (Lincoln, Nebraska) 18 Jan 1942, 21

<sup>67</sup> St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri), 22 January 1899, 9; Kansas City Journal (Kansas City, Missouri) 21 May 1899, 3; Los Angeles Herald, #44, 13 November 1899, 1.

Nor was Miller the first (or last) to conceive of a plan for a 'super-city' or city for the elite at Lake Chapala. English writer D.H. Lawrence, who spent several weeks in 1923 at the lake writing the first draft of *The Plumed Serpent*, had long dreamed about establishing Ranimim, "a remote colony for himself and a few followers," and referred to the idea in the pages of that book.<sup>68</sup>

Earlier, Mexican artist Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), a native of Guadalajara, had expressed somewhat similar ideas, though he concluded that either Pihuamo in southern Jalisco or the Oblatos Canyon, north of Guadalajara, would be a preferable location.

As far as tertiary (post-preparatorio) education at Lake Chapala was concerned, it was to be several decades before the Universidad de Guadalajara opened a satellite campus (Centro Universitario de la Ciénega) in Ocotlán in 1994. Only as recently as 2018 did the university announce a plan for a regional campus in the town of Chapala.

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<sup>68</sup> L. D. Clark. 1964. Dark Night of the Body: D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*. University of Texas, page 5.