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Haunts of the Hill: Western Kentucky University Ghostlore

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HAUNTS OF THE HILL: WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY GHOSTLORE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Arthur Gordon Van Ness, IV

May 2012

HAUNTS OF THE HILL: WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY GHOSTLORE

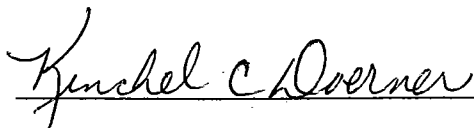
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6 April 2012


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Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

I dedicate this thesis to my father, Arthur Gordon Van Ness III, who is a great inspiration to me. Also, I also dedicate this work to my wife Maria Kay Van Ness, who helped greatly in acquiring the footage and editing the film.

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Arthur Gordon Van Ness IV

May 2012

13 Pages

Directed by: Erika Brady, Tim Evans, and Ann Ferrell

Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology

Western Kentucky University

Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, like all colleges and universities, has some interesting history. In this case, for my thesis project, I looked at specific tales regarding several buildings on campus that one hears upon arrival to campus. The buildings I included are Potter Hall, Barnes Campbell, Rodes-Harlin, Van Meter, Florence Schneider, McLean Hall, and Pearce-Ford Tower. I explored the details of the traditional oral narratives and compared those details from personal or close to personal experience. Next, I analyzed the details that have stayed the same over time or changed.

To accomplish my project I went to a few of the Welcome Week campus tours, conducted audio and video interviews, archival research, as well as video recording the annual ghost walk in October given by the Communications department. The project comprises mainly of a documentary film with a complimentary written component.

What I found was that the stories show some correlation between the traditional oral narratives and the first hand experiences such as names, times, experiences, and location of the events. In conclusion, I have found that in oral tales, certain details stay the same, change, and also become transformed over time. Western, like all colleges, has events that touch people's lives and because of that impact, as well as the uniqueness of these stories, it means that certain stories will continue to be told. For further research, I

would include the rest of the stories that one hears at Western including Phi Delta Theta, Delta Tau Delta, Lambda Chi Alphas, Kappa Sigma Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and Ivan Wilson as well as to continue doing further research on these oral narratives. I also would like to look at other colleges, larger and smaller, in order to get a larger sample of oral narratives at different locations over time.

Introduction

It was August 29, 2008, and the students had recently returned to campus. For some, this was their first experience of college, while for others it was a time to see familiar faces they missed during the summer. For Officer Ryan Dillon of the Western Kentucky University Police Department, that night was a terrifying experience – his introduction to Diane Watkins in Potter Hall. At three in the morning, “a call box in the elevator went off in the basement of Potter Hall” (Dillon interview, 12 September 2008). The dispatcher could not make out exactly what was being said; static echoed in the dispatch office, and every few seconds a distinct woman’s voice came over the wire. The building was locked, and no one was supposed to be in the administrative building at this time. Officer Dillon was dispatched to check for a woman possibly in distress. A three-year veteran on the force and a self-proclaimed skeptic, Dillon, entered the building and found no one (Dillon interview, 12 September 2008). While on the fourth floor finishing his sweep of the building, Dillon heard the dispatcher say that the call box had gone off again. The dispatcher noted it sounded like the same girl’s voice coming from down in the basement elevator. Dillon rushed down the hall and into the stairwell. He turned the corner, looked down the hallway, and saw nothing. This happened twice more that night; the last time was at six in the morning. No woman was ever found (Dillon interview, 12 September 2008). This episode serves well as an example of the kind of event that often becomes the core of campus supernatural narrative.

I began my own college experience in the fall of 1998 at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. Upon arrival, I attended Orientation Week, a weeklong initiation run by returning students, staff, and faculty chairs. In the course of that week, I heard stories

about the campus from the students and even professors and staff. These stories sometimes were told on tours with parents; however, most often they were shared in private among only students. When I later entered the Folk Studies graduate program at Western Kentucky University in the fall of 2007, I was therefore interested in the campus's similar ghostlore. I sought to hear these tales, and as with Longwood's Orientation Week, during Master Plan at WKU, I heard oral narratives of ghosts on campus. I heard an abundance of ghostlore at Western Kentucky University just as I did at Longwood.

Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, has a unique history and tales specific to WKU that one does not find in its college manual. Students hear a variety of stories pertaining to the supernatural upon their arrival to campus. Known to the students generically as ghost stories whether or not "ghosts" actually play a role, these stories are told throughout the years spent on campus. In previous research, folklorists have looked at college ghostlore from a cultural, psychological, and sociological viewpoint; their studies have seldom correlated the details present in first-person accounts of the core episodes and the subsequent narratives that have developed in oral tradition. In developing this project, I pose two key questions: to what extent do the plot and details of oral tradition narratives correspond to the contemporary first-hand or near-first-hand accounts? Secondly, which details present in the legends disappear or become transformed? Once these questions are addressed, it becomes possible to speculate concerning the reasons for these alterations. To answer these two questions, I first plan to examine popular oral narrative regarding Potter Hall, Barnes Campbell, Rodes-Harlin, Van Meter, Florence Schneider, McLean Hall, and Pearce-Ford Tower. I

will then compare these narratives to first-hand accounts regarding occurrences in these buildings. This comparison will assist in determining which details are stable in both the first-hand accounts and oral narratives and which details disappear or are transformed. The thesis project includes a video documentary with a written supplementary piece.

Survey of Literature

Recently, folklorists have published an increasing amount of research concerning ghostlore on campus. Legends and other forms of oral tradition research have been covered by various folklorists including Linda Dégh, Lynwood Montell, and Diane Goldstein. The seminal work *Legends and Belief* by Linda Dégh serves as a modern perspective on legends and the beliefs surrounding them. She brings them out of the limited realm of legends concerning historic figures and episodes. Dégh focuses on “legends that are believed . . . set in the recent past, and involve normal human beings rather than ancient gods or demi-gods” (Dégh 2001:92). In the book, she explores both past and current legends, specifically looking at the legend-tellers and the stories' localized settings. *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* by Diane Goldstein, Sylvia Grider, and Jeannie Thomas is another book of contemporary scholarship on ghostlore further contextualizing ghostlore in contemporary North America. A third book regarding legends and the conditions under which they are told is by William Ellis: *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults*, in which the social historical implications of oral tradition and belief are explored. These books are good examples of professional academic folklorist work examining the notion of legends, beliefs, and ghostlore.

My particular approach has been informed by that adduced by Lynwood Montell in his important works *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History* (1970) and *From*

Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research (1981). The first book demonstrates the usefulness of oral narrative in uncovering the history of a community in which other forms of documented history are scarce, utilizing Coe Ridge, a small African-American colony located in Cumberland County Kentucky as an example. The second book, coauthored by Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell, offers more explicit guidelines for historians looking to link oral sources with historic events.

College folklore, the particular realm of this thesis project, has been of interest to folklorists for at least the past fifty years, notably drawing attention from Richard Dorson in his 1959 work *American Folklore*. In his work *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life*, Bronner did an overall survey of college folklore including ghostlore, jokes, and jargon on a wide array of campuses in the United States (1995). While Bronner's focus is on general campus folklore, another folklorist, Elizabeth Tucker, focuses on legends and ghostlore. Tucker has published two books on college ghostlore. The first, published in 2005, is titled *Campus Legends: A Handbook*. The second is *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*, published in 2007. Lynwood Montell has also turned his tireless energy to the topic of ghostlore in western and southcentral Kentucky to the folklore specific to college life, especially ghostlore and legends on campus in works including *Mysterious Tales from the Barrens, Kentucky Ghosts, Ghosts across Kentucky, and Haunted Houses, and Family Ghosts of Kentucky*

By their nature, legends are mutable, and their variants have interested folklorists in recent years in ways that inform this project. A survey of the way stories change over time is featured in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* by Jan Brunvand and *Haunted Halls* by Elizabeth Tucker. I have been especially interested in the introduction of “new”

information to legend accounts, as well as the elimination of some details. These changes can tell us much concerning the nature of the teller's concern with the story, the level of belief, and the attraction of ghostlore in general.

Survey of Video

The primary element in this thesis project is a documentary video concerning ghostlore on the campus of Western Kentucky University. Anthropologists, folklorists, journalists, and commercial film-makers have documented many aspects of folklore through the years. The production of a documentary film examining ghostlore has presented particular challenges, since the nature of the material demands that the storytellers provide compelling material on which the viewers' imagination and intellect can work. I have been able to identify one documentary film on college ghosts, "College Hauntings," produced by Gary White, a journalist in Lexington, Kentucky, and published in 1998. The film covers three colleges in Pennsylvania, Cabrini College, Temple University, and Beaver College. The film examines tales from each school, adhering to traditional documentary style with voice overs, archival footage, and reenactments.

A brief documentary of local interest is "Passport to the Supernatural," filmed by Denise Beauchamp, a communications major. Produced in the early 1980s, "Passport" covers several tales of Western Kentucky University including some involving Florence Schneider Hall and Potter Hall. Although dated in appearance, this film remains popular on Western's campus, especially around Halloween.

Methodology

Primary methods of documentation for this thesis project include recorded interviews and archival research. I was particularly interested in interviewing faculty and

staff at the university who have had firsthand experience of the originating episodes giving rise to campus oral tradition: Howard Bailey and Gloria Carrico, for example, both have experiences with tragedies that took place in Potter and Barnes-Campbell halls.

The experiences of Howard Bailey, for example, are based on his own knowledge of the death in Barnes-Campbell and experiences of the haunting shortly afterwards. Bailey was a student and Resident Assistant when a student was tragically killed in an elevator accident in early November 1967. Bailey recounted witnessing the police scene over at Barnes-Campbell that day in our interview (Bailey 2007). Later, as an Assistant Hall Director for Barnes-Campbell Hall, he on numerous occasions experienced phenomena difficult to explain.

Like Bailey, Gloria Carrico was working in a building where a death occurred that attracted a share of supernatural narrative: a student suicide in Potter Hall where she worked as a Residence Hall Director in the fall of 1978 (Carrico 2007). She had previous interaction with the student when the student unsuccessfully attempted suicide her first semester and withdrew from Western until her mental state could be cleared to return to school. Carrico herself discovered the body of the young woman the night she committed suicide. Like Bailey, she experienced inexplicable events such as the movement of objects and the opening of doors on their own. These personal first-hand experiences as well as supernatural encounters are of interest for they help show what details are consistent in the first-hand and near first hand accounts compared to oral tradition and if there is any transformation over time.

The next set of interviews was with students who have either had experiences or heard the stories in these buildings. These students include Hannah George, Dana Lynn,

Katie Steward, Matt Hale, Sandi Borowick, Tonya Merriam, Tyler Parrish, Alexia Ault, Samantha Wooton, and Ann Boehme. These informants make up the majority of the firsthand and oral narrative accounts on campus in my research.

The club Students Paranormal Organization of KY, SPOOKY, at WKU was the first and only situation where I interviewed a group of students at once. One thing I would like to do for future research is to do more multiple informant interviews, as these types tend to yield a better variety of stories for each question, and answers help remind others of certain information they might not otherwise remember. Seeking out informants through these means helped yield the most information and continued to expand my knowledge base on the subject.

Aside from word of mouth, I uncovered subjects for interviews by setting up a website on my project at <http://www.hauntsofthehill.com> and <http://www.collegehosts.com> where I described the project along with giving my contact information. Along with posting information on my own websites and on my Youtube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/wizrd79>, and my Vimeo account, <http://www.vimeo.com/wizrd79>, I posted the original documentary completed as part of my Ethnographic Documentary class that covered Potter Hall and Barnes-Campbell, entitled "Secrets: Western Kentucky University's Ghostlore". Students, faculty, and staff long gone were able to see video of my project and contacted me for an interview, eager to share their thoughts and experiences.

Social websites like Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com>, and Myspace, <http://www.myspace.com> may be useful in indentifying interviewees for research such as mine, but I did not find them helpful in this project. I received some brief descriptions of

experiences, but the majority of responses have been from my undergraduate school Longwood University and other Virginia schools surprisingly.

One of the best ideas I had originally was video recording the “Haunted Hill Tours” done by the Communications Department at WKU for the past three years. The tours, led by Hannah George, among others, from 2007-2009, helped me hear the most active stories passed on by students on campus. Through the tours I learned of some faculty and staff that had personal experiences regarding the tales on campus including Howard Bailey, Gloria Carrico, and Tamela Smith. Video recording the tours was immensely beneficial to the project, as I was able to gather information from the leaders of the tour, the students on the tour, and even people just stopping by while the tour was being given. I was able to hear firsthand accounts of students currently enrolled during the tours as well as different variations on the tales.

Folk studies professors mentioning my name when doing a project or reading aloud an article on ghosts in class helped me gain further informants. Articles and news pieces on my project in the *College Heights Herald* and a news broadcast by WKYU also helped gain respect as people began to hear about me and became interested in sharing their tales and experiences. This past Halloween, a draft of the documentary was even shown on campus, at which time further advice and informants came forward. Even psychics interested in my project contacted me.

In addition to interviewing, I engaged in archival research in support of this project. There are two facets to this part of the research. The first is archival research of previous research on the ghostlore at Western in the form of student papers, projects, and interviews. The majority of the pieces are from the 1970s and early 1980s. They help to

ascertain when the stories are first being told on campus and by whom. For example, noting that the girl in Potter Hall committed suicide in 1979 and that the first recorded ghost stories appeared after this date helps to verify the progression of events through the firsthand accounts and oral narratives. Through the research, I even found another documentary film done in the 1980s by Denise Beauchamp, a communications major at WKU, on various tales including Potter Hall and Florence Schneider, which was beneficial to see. By watching this film done shortly after Diane's death, I saw that the ghostly experiences were indeed being experienced even four years later.

The second aspect of the archival research was looking through various vertical stacks of news stories from over the years on the subject. These helped me gather further information on the stories and potential informants. Police reports from the Bowling Green Police department as well as Western Kentucky University's police help from Captain Mike Dowell added further information specific to the various tales. These reports include photographs of the buildings under construction, which helped further the understanding of the accounts and narratives.

Conclusion

Legends, I suggest, help fill in the gaps when students are mastering the "lay of the land" at a university, acting as an auditory guide for learning about their campus in an interesting and memorable way. The stories surrounding Potter Hall, Barnes Campbell, Van Meter, Rodes-Harlin, Florence Schneider, McLean Hall, and Pearce-Ford Tower are seven examples of legends on campus. If this is the case, then to what extent do the plot and details of oral tradition narratives correspond to the contemporary first-hand or near-first-hand accounts? And which details corresponding to first-hand accounts persist in the

oral tradition, and which details present in legend disappear or become transformed? And finally, how do alterations in the narrative reflect the particular needs and concerns of each generation of new students at Western? This documentary cannot fully answer these questions, but represents a point of departure for further research and analysis of this rich topic.

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