

SEXTON HOUSE
by
Christian Anthony

April 5, 1991

I. Introduction

- A. Belief about a house in Russellville, Kentucky.
- B. Barbara Provience, my informant

II. Reason for interest

- A. To gain true understanding of the belief.
- B. To help people come to a sensible conclusion.
- C. The story my friends told me about the "Sexton House."

III. Interview of my informant

- A. First time my informant heard the story.
- B. The version of the story my informant heard.
 - 1. Reason why window was painted.
 - 2. Explanation why people might see a reflection.

IV. Communities interest

- A. Inquire about seeing, hearing or feeling the "young lady."
- B. Responds with a incident story.

V. Community play a major role

- A. Community helps spread belief.
 - 1. Grandparents
 - 2. Parents
 - 3. Friends
- B. Other sources that help spread belief.
 - 1. Pamphlets
 - 2. Books
 - 3. Article from Folk Archives

VI. Possible Explanation for meaning of story

- A. Historical legend
- B. Religious legend
- C. Supernatural legend

VII. What makes people interested in the Sexton House?

- A. What people believe
- B. Different versions in U.S.
- C. Make a conclusion.

The Belief of the Sexton House
Christian Anthony
Western Kentucky University

This project concerns a belief that has been circulating over the United States since the 1800's. The belief is about a house which is in Russellville, Kentucky. The house is known as the Sexton House. My informant, Barbabra Proviencie who resides in the house, is the wife of the late Bill Proviencie, a Sexton or caretaker of the Maple Grove Cemetery.

My purpose of this project is to gain a true understanding of the "Sexton" belief, and to help people and myself to come to a sensible conclusion. The story that was told to me by some of my basketball friends was that there was a young girl around the age of 17, who was getting ready for prom. A big thunder storm came and lightning followed. The young girl's parents told her that the weather was too bad for her to be going out, so they told her she couldn't go. The girl then stormed up to her room cursing God. They said she stood in front of her window looking at the storm and a big bolt of lightning struck her dead.

According to Mrs. Proviencie, she heard the story her fifth grade year in school through a pamphlet about tales, fables, and folklores. She said the way she remembers the story is that "a young lady was getting dressed in her designery, and this storm came, she cursed God, lightning struck her and that's how the fable went leaving a reflection on the glass."¹ The glass has been painted over, now its white. Mrs. Proviencie showed me that there was no entrance to the window which could've been an attic. But Mrs. Proviencie and her family are not sure if the house had been remodeled or not. To her knowledge, it hasn't.

In the interview I asked, "Do you know the reason why they painted the window?" She replied, "I was told that it was because people objected to sin."

She then explained that old glass has imperfections and she believed that people were seeing the reflection of car lights shining on the tombstones in the glass.²

Mrs. Proviencence told me that people in Russellville, Kentucky, may ask questions related to her ever seeing, hearing, or feeling the young woman's presence. She said, "I would just laugh and tell them about the scrub brush incident." This is where she was scrubbing the kitchen floor and the phone rang. She put the scrub brush down and went to answer the phone. When she returned, to her surprise, she couldn't find the scrub brush. She sat down in the middle of the floor laughing and thought, "Well the lady has come and took my brush!" But she realized that she just didn't feel deep enough into her bucket.³

After hearing Mrs. Proviencence's little incident, I became interested in knowing if the community had any affect on her family's life. I learned that the community loved the story and played a major role in spreading the story to friends and tourists. She told me children were interested in the Sexton House because of tales told to them by their grandparents, parents, and friends as they passed by the house.⁴ Other methods of keeping the legend alive are brought about by pamphlets distributed by the Russellville Chamber of Commerce displaying a brief description of the Sexton House. The listing is printed "Sexton House - Maple Grove Cemetery - c. 1870. It is fabled the site of "a ghost appearance in second floor window." The pamphlet seems to draw attention to the house since it is specified as an attraction on the tour route.⁵ Take note that there are no tours of the house from the inside. Mrs. Proviencence doesn't feel that there is anything to see since there is no way to the second floor. With a smile on her face, she told me that the family wouldn't mind the "lady" coming to visit as long as she is pretty.

In the book, Place - Names of Logan County and Oft Told Tales, author Margaret Barnes-Stratton claims that she used to park across the street and stare at the window of the Sexton House, in which she saw the reflection of the girl. She also explains that the caretaker's wife couldn't take the attention being placed on the window of the house. The caretaker scrubbed the window with all his power, but the reflection never disappeared. She claims the original glass has never been removed or boarded up, but the caretaker did paint the window a deep green color. Mrs. Stratton described the reflection as a "plain, life-sized shape of a woman, arms straight down, the lower part of the body ending at the window sill."⁶

As I researched this project, I noticed some parts of the story are the same. An example is that all of the versions end with the girl being struck by lightning. Other parts of the story vary. For example, some stories begin with the girl going on a date, to a party, for a drive, or to prom. I obtained various versions from friends and the Department of Folk Archives. This is where I ran across an article about Mrs. Roberts, who said, "I lived there most of my childhood. My father painted the window to serve as a discouragement to sightseers who constantly plagued our family." The article goes on to say that there was no way a person could dress in the area where the lady was supposedly struck because the area was so tiny. Personally, Mrs. Roberts doesn't believe the story, but is proud of the publicity.⁷

The Sexton story represents three legends - a historical legend, a religious legend, and a supernatural legend. The historical legend is based on actual people and/or events and expands throughout the generations with the help of the media including movies, television, magazines, and books.⁸ According to Barbara Allen, a former Bowling Green resident, the Sexton House became very popular after the invention of photography.

The religious legend is an event involving gods, saints, or humans that certain groups of people attest to. This is shown by the illustration of the girl cursing at God because of the storm, then the bolt of lightning strikes her dead.⁹ Is this a sign of God's doings?

The last legend deals with the supernatural including stories of ghosts, spirits, witches, the dead, haunted places, etc. Supernatural legends flourish at night in the shadows, when people are susceptible to their fears.¹⁰ A good example of this is the reflection of the young girl in the window. According to Russellville resident Christy Wilkins "the only time you are supposed to see the reflection is when it is raining or cloudy outside."¹¹

What makes people interested in the Sexton House stories? Some people say curiosity. Others say they've seen the image and still others use it as a good conversation piece. The Sexton House is interesting to me because people have different versions, and beliefs carried down through the years. Plus, it's a legend that may or may not be true, but has been circulated all over the world originated not 75 miles from Bowling Green in a little town such as Russellville, Kentucky. I know that with all the different resources I've compiled, one can examine the information and draw their own conclusions. Someday when I pass by the Sexton House with my own daughter, I can tell her the story of the young girl in the window.

ENDNOTES

1. Interview, Mrs. Proviencia, March 13, 1991, Russellville, KY.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Chamber of Commerce, 1990. "Russellville Historic Tour",
edition 1990, catalogue no. 20
Russellville, KY: Department of Travel Development
6. Stratton, Margaret B., 1950. Place - Names of Logan County and Oft-told
Tales, ed. 1950, pp. 45-7
Russellville, KY: News Democrat
7. Folk Archives
8. Shoemaker, George H. Mead, 1990. The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday
Life, ed. 1990, pp.236-40
Bloomington, IN: Trickster Press
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

Barbara Allen article reference?

REFERENCES CITED

1. Chamber of Commerce, 1990. "Russellville Historic Tour",
 edition 1990, catalogue no. 20
 Russellville, KY: Department of Travel Development
2. Shoemaker, George H. Mead, 1990. The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday
 Life, ed. 1990, pp. 236-40
 Bloomington, IN: Trickster Press
3. Stratton, Margaret B., 1950. Place - Names of Logan County and Oft-told
 Tales, ed. 1950, pp. 45-7
 Russellville, KY: News Democrat

QUESTIONS

1. How long have you known about the belief of the Sexton House?
2. What version of the belief of Sexton House have you heard?
3. When did you first hear about the story?
4. How many versions have been told to you?
5. How did it affect the community and your family?
6. Do you know when the belief originated?
7. Has living in the house caused any problems with family and friends?
8. When you first moved into the house, did you know of the belief? If so, how could you sleep at night knowing?
9. Since you have been living here, have you heard any noise or seen the figure in the window?
10. Do many people show interest in the belief? What ages are most interested?
11. Do you believe in the belief? Why or why not.