



Center for Community & Regional Research

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**Documenting and Interpreting
Minnesota Folklore**

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CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION

**Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
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Summary:

During the Summer of 1995, the Principal Investigator and Research Assistant, funded by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs and the Minnesota Historical Society, traveled through Minnesota, documenting local folk traditions and legends. The purpose was to produce field reports that, along with information from the Minnesota Folklore Archive at UMD, could be used for two related projects:

1. Outreach:

As a contribution to community outreach, the Principal Investigator will produce a series of articles, drawing from this fieldwork and the Folklore Archive, aimed at an educated, popular audience. The first of these has been submitted for consideration by *Minnesota Monthly* magazine. These articles will introduce the serious study of folk traditions to a wider audience, increasing their awareness both of their local heritage and its connections with wider cultural patterns. Folklore and local history projects have proved to be extremely successful in involving community people in the documentation of their cultural traditions, producing a sense of "ownership" in that documentation and interpretation.

2. The Anthropology of Local Narrative:

Local legends may be studied as expressions of community identity, and its ties to place. In recent years, the study of narrative has gained a central place in interpretive social science. While there is a large body of literature about personal narrative, there has been relatively little work on social or community narratives. This research suggests that in spite of some theorists' assertions that local traditions are dying (see De Certeau, 1993), local narratives do have an important role in the maintenance of community and a sense of place (see, e.g. Tuan, 1991). Thus, the Principal Investigator continues to use the Minnesota examples to explore larger theoretical issues of narrative and the making of meaning in everyday life.

Background: The Minnesota Folklore Archive:

During the last few years, Folklore classes have been regularly taught at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. An integral part of the class is a fieldwork project, during which students are required to collect examples of folklore from friends, family, and other sources. Over 800 of these projects are now in storage, dating back to the 1970s.

These projects constitute an unused archive of Minnesota folk legends, jokes, remedies, beliefs, occupational jargon, and much else besides, with the largest proportion of material originating from North-East Minnesota. At other universities, most notably Indiana University, which has a doctoral Folklore program, similar archives have proved extremely valuable for scholars working in folklore and popular culture, and have provided raw material for numerous research publications (Langlois and LaRonge 1983; Suter 1994; Wilson 1986). Folklore texts, for example, serve as primary data for scholars in American Studies, Cultural Studies, History, Anthropology, and Women's Studies. Universities that maintain folklore archives, such as Indiana, Utah, and Pennsylvania, have found them to be invaluable resources for scholarship, published in such journals as *Indiana Folklore*. In addition, they provide a rich record of regional culture, used by academics, journalists, and the public. Scholarly use of such material is only possible, however, if the large amount of raw data is properly catalogued and indexed. During the grant period, the Research Assistant completed the archiving of the Minnesota materials, and these can now be accessed for research purposes.

Pilot Fieldwork Project:

Along with many other subject areas, the archive includes a range of texts that represent legends associated with specific Minnesota locations. Among these are ghost tales (e.g. haunted ships on lake Superior, a ghost that appears on a certain ski slope, the ghost of a girl who was buried alive in New Ulm); place name legends (e.g.. the origins of Big Jesse Lake, why Skyline Parkway in Duluth is not Highway 13); unusual happenings (e.g.. the "wolf-boy" who survived the Hinkley fire, "moving Mary," the perambulating statue in Montevideo, the "sanitarium" near Granite Falls); local variations of common national legends (e.g.. the killer at the Thunderbird Mall in Virginia, the abducted child at Target); and many others as yet unlocated.

During the grant period, the investigators located examples of such legends that are housed in the archive, and began follow-up research to learn more about particular legends and their provenance. The importance of this phase was to understand the lived context of these legends, through unstructured interviews. The archive material yields only texts; through ethnographic fieldwork, we may begin to understand how legends function within a community. My recent published articles on legend trips and pregnancy folklore are examples of that approach, and I see them as a model for the kind of rich ethnographic data that can only be achieved through hands-on fieldwork (Bird 1994a, 1994b). The existing data base and the fieldwork material form the basis of the journalistic article submitted to *Minnesota Monthly*.

The aim of the piece is to describe and interpret folk culture within its historical and cultural contexts. Many regional books and articles on folklore, while interesting for their

content, lack consideration of context, and are woefully inadequate in their treatment of folklore theory. Scholarly and popular understandings of folklore have diverged dramatically in recent years: Popular notions of folk culture perceive it as those elements in culture that are archaic, anachronistic, and quaint, while academics have come to stress the dynamic, relevant qualities of folklore (Georges and Owen Jones, 1995). For instance, on the one hand, folklore may help perpetuate the stereotyping and oppression of marginalized groups (de Caro, 1986); on the other hand, it may be a tool for those very groups to resist subordination. My aim in this work is to bring the scholarly and popular understandings of folklore closer together.

REPORT NARRATIVE:

Ghosts of the Past: Minnesota Folk Legends as Symbolic History

Folklore and History

A group of teenagers gather round an unusual statue in a graveyard, telling tales of how the strange monument came to be. A town resident shows visitors an old cave, entertaining them with an anecdote about how it got its name from an "Indian legend." One Minnesota Finn gets a laugh and nod of recognition from another Finn with a tall tale about an ethnic hero. These kinds of oral traditions, passed on from person to person independently of mass media, schools, or churches, are the stuff of folklore. Like anywhere else, Minnesota is rich in folk traditions -- traditions which we aim to document and interpret in this essay.

"Folklore" is one of those terms that carries many, often contradictory, associations. To some people, it is anything that is untrue -- "that's just folklore, pay no attention." To others, it is the quaint sayings and beliefs of previous generations -- cute but irrelevant. Similarly, folklore is seen as the strange beliefs of the uneducated or backward, who cling to outmoded and anachronistic ways of understanding. And to most people, folklore is essentially the opposite of history, in that history recounts factual events, while folklore is pure fiction.

Those who study folklore disagree with all these views, and they argue that historians, social scientists and others should pay more attention to folk traditions, since those traditions can tell us a great deal about the cultural history and present cultural identity of any group.

So what is folklore, if not the dead remnants of the past? Contemporary folklorists define their subject in a variety of ways¹, but one thing they agree on is that everyone knows and passes on folklore, whether they are urban or rural, professional or blue collar, old or young. We are all

members of various interlocking folk groups, who gain a sense of identity through sharing stories, jokes, legends, and beliefs.² Those folk groups can be based on a shared identity experienced through our occupation, our membership of a family, our gender, our age, or any number of other criteria.

And, just as we belong to a folk group related to our occupation (for example bartenders and fishery workers have their own folklore³), we also belong to groups defined by ethnicity and location. Maybe in part we define ourselves in relation to our Swedish ancestry, or our identity as residents of a particular town or region. Our purpose in this article is to explore the folklore of place in Minnesota, through a discussion of the many local legends that flourish here -- legends of haunted sites, local characters, explanations of local place names and so on. All the legends we discuss are current tales, for our purpose here is not to mine the history books for stories that have died out, but rather to find the stories that people of all ages still tell. While such legends can sometimes be useful to historians, in confirming factual information about a past event, or filling gaps in the historical record⁴, their main importance is not so much in giving us accurate information about what really happened. Rather, their value lies in helping us understand what people *thought* happened, or perhaps what might have happened. Folklorists are less concerned about confirming the truth of a legend; they are more concerned with interpreting what it means, and why people still bother to tell it. Far from being useless, dead nonsense, folklore is seen from this perspective as a dynamic part of contemporary culture, remembered and passed on because it serves some cultural purpose.

As Elliott Oring writes, "folklore is ... a mode of expression which emphasizes the human and personal as opposed to the formal and institutional."⁵ Folk responses are not those found in the history books or taught in school, but the explanatory stories, jokes and beliefs that people create themselves. Thus, if we want to know the official version of why and when the High Bridge

in Stillwater was built, we consult local histories. If we want to understand the role the bridge has come to play in the lives of local teenagers, and how they use it to explore their own fears and concerns about growing up, we interpret the living folklore of the bridge (as we shall do later in this article). For as William Wilson comments, "If we are to know the heart and mind of our people, we must know their folklore." ⁶

Our intention, then, is to describe and interpret some of the many examples of living local legends in Minnesota. In a classic article on the functions of folklore, William Bascom points out what might seem obvious: an important function of folk traditions is that they entertain.⁷ Many local legends are intriguing, scary, funny, or just plain interesting. They are fun to tell and to listen to, and we hope to convey some of that fun in our discussion.

But folklore has other functions too. As Bascom explains, folklore serves to educate people about their culture's values -- in legend the good are rewarded, and the evil punished. It may serve as an outlet for fantasy and wish fulfillment -- legends may tell of people doing things we would like to do but dare not, or they may rewrite history so that it more closely reflects what we would have liked to have happened. And while Bascom's list ends there, other functions and meanings for folklore are clear. Legends may help us articulate fears, and perhaps come to terms with them -- many legends deal with death, the afterlife, or with people we fear. And perhaps most important when discussing local legends is the question of identity.⁸ Through local legends, we may mark out what is different about our community, or our ethnic group, while at the same time marking out those who are *not* like us.

Minnesota, like any region, has hundreds of current legends. Many of them are regional versions of national and international "urban legends," which tell about children being abducted in malls, or mad axemen in the backs of cars.⁹ While these are fascinating in their own right, we wish to concentrate here on legends that are tied to specific Minnesota places. Even these, as we

shall see, usually have much in common thematically with local legends found elsewhere, but still have a distinctive Minnesota accent. We cannot begin to cover all the legends that flourish here, but will sample them, offering our interpretations of their meaning.¹⁰

How Legends Develop

Why is it that some places seem to invite the telling of stories? Unusual houses, cemeteries, lonely bridges, are the kind of places around which legends cluster.¹¹ At the heart of many local legends is an attempt to explain ambiguity -- something does not seem to quite belong, or is different from those around it.¹² Grave yards are full of grave markers, and yet only one or two are likely to have stories attached to them. Those one or two will be different, or distinctive in some way. In New Ulm, for example, in a cemetery rich with interesting markers, is one that stands out. It is a statue of a boy dressed in a formal suit, standing casually, one leg crossed over the other. (Photo) To look at the statue is to inevitably wonder -- who was he, how did he die, why is this grave marker so personal and touching? In the absence of clear historical information, the folk impulse is to answer these questions, and to fill in the blanks. A visit to the Brown County Historical Society will tell you the history of the boy -- Thomas Amon Peterson, eight-year-old son of Senator and Mrs. S. D. Peterson. He was known as "Allie," and that name is in his grave-marker. He died from "enlargement of the heart" in 1883, in spite of his parents' and doctors' efforts to save him. The Historical Society has a photograph, which the bereaved parents used as a model for the statue. Local folklore tells us otherwise, however:

Back in New Ulm, MN, there's a fenced-in statue of a boy within a cemetery. It is rumored that the boy was a straight A student and was very proud of that fact, but killed himself one day after receiving a bad grade. It is claimed that the fenced in area surrounding the statue is haunted by his restless spirit. Anyone who enters this domain risks being cursed by some sort of failure. No one I know has actually

tested this claim for obvious reasons. But everyone seems to believe it unquestioningly since they heard that someone else who knows someone that did test it is now miserable and they aren't willing to try it themselves.¹³

Folklorists then, are interested in what the "facts" of the legend may be, but they are more interested in how the folk legends developed, in particular ways. Thus, the sad, but not uncommon reality of a child's early death becomes translated into a tragedy that helps us explore the fears associated with pressure to succeed. Folk legends then, are not just about the site itself, but about the particular concerns of the people who tell the legends -- in this case, students who worry about grades.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the boy's statue has become something of a pilgrimage site for local youths, who bring "Allie" offerings of flowers, and challenge him to step down from his pedestal, in a classic "legend trip," a point to which we shall return.

For the unusual is not merely explained away randomly, but is explained in legends that have cultural salience -- that deal with particular concerns and fears. Like Allie, many legends explore the death of children. Our expectations tell us that young children should not die, and the folk imagination tries to cope with such reality by telling tales about it. In some cases, the tales stem from actual deaths of young people. For example, near Granite Falls and Montevideo is the Swensson farm, a site that is now open for tours because of its historic interest. (Photo) The Swensson farm is a prime candidate for legend development for a number of reasons. First, it is unusually large for its age and location. It stands alone, with few other buildings nearby. And perhaps most significantly, it has its own little family grave plot, where a group of headstones testifies to the lives and deaths of the family in the 19th century. (Photo) Graves in the "wrong" place inevitably invite comment and speculation -- graves and a family farm do not belong together. Furthermore, some of the headstones are clearly for Swenssons who died as children. While deaths of young children were quite common in the 19th century, of course, they became

progressively less so as time went by, and the conjuncture of graves and farm house also became more and more unusual.

As a result, the folk again filled in the blanks. Some of the stories are fairly conventional "ghost tales," incorporating a murder and a haunting. The house is now open for tours, except, the story goes, for an upstairs bedroom:

Some say that a murder was committed in the bedroom. Others say the woman to whom it belonged witnessed a horrible crime and went crazy up there. She simply locked herself in and eventually starved. No one ever went in after she originally locked the door ... Some nights the figure of a woman all dressed in white can be seen there and looks out over the farm.¹⁵

Other versions are more specific to the Swensson farm circumstances, and once again, the focus is on the death of children. In these tales, several of the people buried in the small graveyard are children, whose death sent their father mad with grief. He was especially distraught by the death of his son, and in order to be closer to the boy, he dug a tunnel from the farmhouse to his grave, which he used to clamber through so he could talk to his son every night. We can see how in this tale, the tragedy of the real children's death is dramatized, and the unusual proximity of the graves and the house is explained as an eccentric plan devised by a father driven to the point of madness by grief, as perhaps any of us might be. The tunnel becomes a symbol of the passage from life to death, which can only be traveled so far, until one's time comes. Thus, real history become transformed into stories full of human drama and emotion. A tale that has mutated into many versions for years concerns a young girl who died in a small town in the late 1800s.¹⁶

Many many years ago, there was a family named ----. I think it was in the 1800s.

There was a girl named ---- who was about six years old. Rumor has it that she got sick and went into a coma and later died. Then her father buried her on the farm

place under a shading tree. He built a wall around her grave and put a cast iron gate on it (which now squeaks in the wind). A couple of days after she was buried the father had dreams that she was alive and crying out to him. After repeatedly hearing these cries he ran out and dug her grave up, opened the casket, and found the inside all scratched up like she had been trying to get out and her fingers were even all bloody from her efforts. Her dad was put in a mental institution and no-one knows what happened to her mother. Even today, the stories still fly because the snow always melts on her grave and leaves don't fall in the fenced in area around her grave.¹⁷

Another version shows how details change while the core of the story remains:

Some time during the 19th century, at age six or seven, --- was playing in a hay loft and accidentally fell out. She was pronounced dead and buried in a long, white dress. Shortly after burial, people began to wonder if she was actually dead or not. Curiosity got the better of them and a group of people dug up the little wooden coffin. Sure enough, there were scratch marks across the top and her fingers looked mangled! She had been buried alive and in desperation, tried to claw her way out! There was nothing the people could do now, but put her back in the ground.¹⁸

This teller goes on to explain that strange things still happen around the grave -- if you put a beer can on her grave, she will drink it by the next day; if you shut off your car engine, it refuses to restart; if you see a doll on top of her grave, the girl has been out playing. She also tells of a local woman who claims she saw the little girl in her white dress walking across a nearby field.

Yet a third version explains that the girl "was playing one day in a lone tree in the middle of a corn field ... she slipped and fell to the ground. The fall knocked her unconscious and in a coma. Her father found her later, and being drunk at the time, thought she was dead. He built a

coffin and buried her right under the lone tree." ¹⁹ This teller reports that the farmer who now owns the land has seen the ghost of the child at her grave, and also includes the belief that cars will stall on the remote road where the grave is located. (Photo)

In this story, we can see clearly how the legend works at different levels. First, it explains the existence of the anomalous grave, which is set apart, in a small, walled-in area, miles from the nearest towns. The dates on the headstone mark it as the grave of a child. According to historical records, there is evidence that, although the girl died of natural causes, her body was moved from a cemetery to the new plot, for unknown reasons, and this may have prompted the "buried alive" motif. This motif is, of course, pervasive in folklore and popular literature, and once it became attached to the site, the popular imagination kept it as a central part of the legend. At another level, the legend explores and warns about careless parenting. Frequently the child is playing in dangerous situations, where she should be supervised; in one version, the father is drunk when he buries her. The message could not be clearer.

And even when there is almost no actual historical event to trigger the tale, the folk still explore these human concerns, even as they answer the question, "why is it there?". In the small town of Janesville, for instance, there is an old house on the main street whose window has invited speculation for years. In the window, you can see the figure of a mannequin or large doll, gazing down on the town park. (Photo) Why is it there? What does it mean? Folklore, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and will piece together the picture to create a full explanation. According to the local newspaper, ²⁰ no-one knows for sure why the mannequin is there, only that it has been there for years. What do the folk say? According to one story, the people who once lived in the house many years ago had a young daughter. One day, they left her in the charge of a neighbor, who allowed her to play unattended in the nearby park. Playing on the swing, she became entangled in the rope, and strangled to death. Her parents placed the doll in the window of their house, as a constant

reminder to the neighbors of how their neglect had cost her life. Other residents told us that the mannequin is to remind the townsfolk of a child, sometimes described as retarded, who was abused and killed in the attic bedroom. Still another story tells of how a woman, grief-stricken at the death of her husband, became crazy and kept the mannequin in the window, thinking it was him.

We can see how in this tale, the total absence of any historical evidence results in a freedom to create "reality." But people have not created just any story. In the various versions of the tale, we can see people have picked up on emotionally-charged motifs that are explored in the narrative. Once again, there is the theme of a young child who died an untimely death, in a tragic way. The stories warn us about either leaving a precious child unattended, or standing by while a child is abused. The doll stands as a mute witness to horrors that might befall our children. And even as local people agree that they do not know the "real" truth of the story, many believe that there is a truth, and this will be revealed when a time capsule, which was buried in the nearby park during bicentennial celebrations in 1976, is eventually opened, adding an extra twist to the mystery.

The Legend Trip

Many local legends, as we have already mentioned, live on not only in the telling, but in activities that surround the site -- activities known to folklorists as "legend trips."²¹ Many local legend sites are not "dead" -- they are believed, with varying degree of seriousness, to still house the spirits of the unfortunate individuals whose stories are now told. So "Allie" is said to come down from his pedestal on moonlit nights, to scare people. If you kiss him you risk death. The isolated grave of the girl who was "buried alive" is sought out by youngsters, who deface the grave-site and tempt her to emerge, or seek evidence that she still walks.

The "buried alive" story illustrates the two-fold structure of the legend trip -- the telling of the

story, followed or accompanied by the visit to the site, and the tests of bravery this usually involves. The legend trip may be a simple short visit, during which stories are told, and fears raised. It may also be a more elaborate, almost ritualistic activity, involving illicit alcohol or drug use, occasional sexual experimentation, and vandalism. Legend trips are, perhaps, one of the few activities that are far outside adult control -- the terms are set by teenagers, who determinedly set out to terrify themselves, and to test the boundaries of adult rationality. Legend trippers are commonly between 15 and 20, or when the teen begins to drive, to the time of legal drinking age. The car offers the freedom to roam their communities with their own rules and in the face of the authorities. Haunted sites are often difficult to find in the dark, with participants relying on vague directions given from memory, which increases the excitement of the car ride. Once there, they frequently mark out the boundaries of the site with graffiti and decoration, delineating it as their territory, and as set apart from normal reality.

At first, ghosts, witches, and murderers might seem a strange reason to drink and get high, but the potent combination of drugs, alcohol and the fear induced by the legend offer a way to escape from the adult world. As Carl Lindahl writes, "At the center of the classic legend is the overlapping of two worlds, an intersection of the everyday and the supernatural."²² The legend trip takes the teenager away from reality to altered states of consciousness where everyday rules do not apply. The teen who pushes the limit by tripping the furthest, testing the limits and getting the closest to the supernatural, gains status within the group. One can see evidence of this in the sites themselves. On one supposedly haunted statue, "Moving Mary" in Montevideo, the fingers are broken off and little offerings are left at the base.²³ (Photo). On the one hand, we can see the signs of testing the ghost by vandalizing it and on the other, appeasing it by leaving offerings. Legend trippers have defaced and even removed tombstones, or marked their progress with damage and graffiti, all apparently as a show of bravado in the face of the unknown. The use of drugs and

alcohol as part of the legend trip heightens the experience by giving a better chance of seeing something out of the ordinary and explaining it later.

A location in Stillwater, Minnesota, illustrates the continuing power of the local legend and its accompanying activities. People know it as the High Bridge -- an impressive structure that spans the St. Croix river 185 feet above the river, secluded from watchful eyes. (Photo). "The bridge was a major engineering feat of its time The bridge was built during 1910 and 1911, is half a mile long, and supported by six piers.²⁴ The bridge is dizzyingly high, with guard rails only along one side. It is located down a dark and infrequently traveled road, which is posted "no trespassing." The visitor must park and hike off the road a distance to get to the site -- the High Bridge is a forbidding enough site on its own merits.

But according to local teenagers, it is also haunted, having been the site of a terrible tragedy many years ago. Details vary, showing clearly the way oral tradition works on a core story over the years, adding and deleting new details according to their relevance to the group telling the story. Most versions hinge around the appearance of a blue or green light, which on dark nights is said to move across the bridge. Usually, the story involves the fate of a night watchman or his young child. In the first version the typical call to defy the legend and test its reality is made:

The "high bridge", as local teens dubbed it, was supposedly built around the turn of the century. During World War One it was presumably used in transporting ammunition from the Twin Cities to out East somewhere. In case of sabotage (from whom I was never told) the railroad company that owned the bridge had a night watchman hired on with the task of keeping the bridge secure, During a dark and rainy night, in the middle of summer, the night watchman started his hourly inspection of the bridge. Upon reaching the middle of the span (between Minnesota and Wisconsin) he happened to get caught on the bridge while an ammunition train

was crossing. In the ensuing ruckus that the train and the high winds made, the night watchman fell from the bridge to his death.

The story goes on to say that the night watchman's ghost walks across the bridge on the midsummer anniversary of his death. The ghost apparently carries a green lantern to light his way on his eternal trip across the bridge. Those unfortunate individuals who see this green light apparently end up dead the day after seeing it.²⁵

In another version the daughter of the night watchman is the central figure:

The story goes that around the turn of the century, Soo Line finished a bridge about 6 miles North of Stillwater. A family lived next to the bridge. The father told the young daughter to stay away from the bridge because she might get hurt. One day near dusk the little girl's dog ran across the bridge so she grabbed a lantern and went to look for it. She saw a train coming and she tried to get back. When the father came home the girl hadn't come back yet so the father went looking for her and found the lantern on the bridge. He didn't know if she was dead or lost in the forest because he couldn't find her body. He looked for her every night with that lantern until he passed away. It is said that if you go there on certain nights you can see the lantern going across the bridge.²⁶

In this version the grief caused by the child's untimely death is the backdrop for the haunting. This next version is told by a now 27-year-old participant in the trip who had heard the story first from his father, which suggests that the legend has been around for some time:

Some of my friends asked me if I had ever seen or heard the story of the "blue light" on the high bridge in Stillwater. I heard about it a little from my dad because he had been up there with some friends when he was a kid, but I had never been there

myself. So my friends told me we should go up to the high bridge tonight since we were so close and I had never been there before. I said okay, but tell me about the "blue light" first. Then they proceeded to tell the story:

About one hundred years ago a boy and some of his friends went to the high bridge and got really drunk. They dared each other to go across the bridge. They went across the bridge and while they were crossing back over one of the boys lost his balance and fell off the bridge into the water. It is said he died instantly and washed away down the river. So the boys all go home and get the father of the boy who fell in. The father goes back up to the high bridge with a blue lantern and looks for the boy but he can't find him so the father decides to commit suicide because he is upset about his son and jumps off the bridge. After this happened the area was blocked off and now no trespassing signs cover the area. Many people still continue to go up there just to park, drink, and try and cross the bridge. These people say they have seen the shadow of the father walking across the bridge with his blue lantern calling out for the boy. Others just look for the blue light or listen for the father.²⁷

This story seeks to account not only for the blue light, and the mysterious bridge, but also for the fact that authorities do try to restrict access to the site, which is posted "no parking" -- apparently with the main purpose of keeping visitors away, since there are no houses close by, and very little traffic. Police frequently patrol the area, and trippers are often ticketed or their cars towed away. The teller of the last story describes the legend trip:

So my friends talked me into going out to the high bridge. So we drove near it, parked our cars, and walked down a long dirt road to get to the bridge. We climbed over the no trespassing signs and proceeded to head toward the bridge. As we

were climbing up the bridge, two sheriff's cars pulled up and waited for us to come down. They asked us what we were doing and began to write us a trespassing ticket. We tried to explain we just wanted to see the "blue light" and we would leave. It ended up we didn't get to cross the high bridge or see the "blue light" that night. All we ended up with was a court date and a fifty dollar fine."²⁸

In yet another version, the caretaker and his family live in a house next to the bridge, a train passes over the bridge and a spark from the train catches the house on fire. The child is the only one in the house and she dies. The father returns home to find his house on fire, and no sign of his daughter. He looks all around the bridge, thinking that she must have fallen off -- and he is still looking, guided by his lantern. Significantly, on the bridge itself there are partially burned railroad ties, perhaps suggesting a source for this version.

From all these variants on the tale, we can see the creativity of the people in constantly generating new spins on a story whose core remains the moving light. We can also see that the stories live on in the activities of the teenage legend trippers; the living reality of the tales is best understood by looking more closely at the legend trip, and the magical atmosphere that surrounds it.

The trip usually begins with groups of adolescents working themselves up by telling legends and ghost stories, perhaps driving around, drinking a few beers, telling scary stories, until someone suggests going to the high bridge to see a ghost. These preliminaries get participants into the right frame of mind -- ready to be scared. Visiting a haunted site is an emotionally charged event, the air electric with anticipation and fright. Even the doubters in the group will experience an adrenalin rush. As one respondent put it, "I really didn't believe in ghosts or anything, but when we got there I sure was scared."²⁹ The High Bridge, like most legend sites, shows the signs of its ritualistic uses, with sections near the end of the bridge marked out by graffiti. (Photo). The excitement of the ritual

generates the bravado that leads teens to venture out along the railroad tracks, looking through the slats at the St. Croix river, almost 200 feet below their feet. Fortunately, perhaps, it also generates a fear of the supernatural that prevents all but the most foolhardy from going too far.

The Stillwater legends themselves interact with the energy of the moment, dramatizing many of the concerns that the teenagers are dealing with in their own lives. In one tale, the child did not listen to her father, and this caused her death. Legend trippers are just at the age where they are testing authority and parental boundaries; the trip itself is part of that testing. Thus the legend offers a challenge, which the youngsters act out. In another version the connection is even clearer -- the boy who died was drinking, just like the present day legend trippers, and his father's suicide was the result.

While legend trips dare teenagers to act against the adult world, they also provide an outlet to confront the anxieties about death, a topic that adolescents are beginning to worry about. Adolescence is a time of great change, both emotionally and physically, and these changes carry with them conflict and anxieties. Parents still try to exert their authority, and the teenager, while still needing that security, is trying to become independent. Legend trips are part of that growing need for independence, and for confronting danger and the reality of death.

So it seems that almost every Minnesota community has its special, haunted site that allow youngsters to explore their fears and their independence. Genoa has the "devil's kitchen," an old, burned-out house where supposedly a baby died in the fire that destroyed it; Trenton has a graveyard where lie the victims of a crazy axeman who wiped out the town "one cold November evening in the 1890s."³⁰ In Saint Cloud's Calvary Cemetery is the Black Angel, a granite marker to a cruel man who murdered some children. "If you touch the angel you will awaken the spirit of the man and you have one minute to get out of the cemetery or something very bad will happen to you."³¹ In Duluth, teenagers recklessly court danger by jumping into the Lester River from a high

railway bridge; before trying it, they may tell tales of a high school student named Trod: "He went to East (high school) back in the seventies or sixties and was know for his gutsy jumps." One day, perhaps broken-hearted when his girlfriend dumped him, he tried a double back flip. "He never came up for air after he hit, and people got spooked out. When the cops finally came got to the scene, they could find no trace or remains of a body. The story goes that if you go there at night, sometimes you can catch the ghost of Trod haunting the water below." ³² Another teller adds: "The only sign of his passing is the name written TROD in spray paint in sight of where he used to jump. Some people say when they hit the water that they can just make out a boy sitting with his hands clutched to his chest down deep on the pool's floor. A can of spray paint rests in his lap ..." ³³ Both the challenge and the warning in this story are crystal clear.

Legends and Questions of Identity

Haunted places and horror tales clearly function for teenagers as a way for them to assert their identity, differentiating themselves from adults and from other groups of adolescents. Knowledge of and participation in a legend visit may mark out students from one high school or community versus another, or perhaps simply demonstrate which kids are "cool" or brave.

The hauntings and horrors of adolescent legends are one thing, but there are many other kinds of local legends that, while just as colorful, are less gruesome. Just as teenagers' legends may serve as some kind of badge of identity, other local tales may also function to mark the teller as belonging to a particular community, family, or ethnic group.

For instance, while the legendary logger Paul Bunyan is well-known as a Minnesota "hero," different ethnic groups may have tales about figures that are more relevant to their traditions. Such is Otto Walta, the source of a range of folk legends among Finnish communities in the state. ³⁴ Unlike Paul Bunyan, the figure of Otto Walta can be traced back to an actual person who lived in the arrowhead region of Minnesota. Like those of Paul Bunyan, his stories revolve around his

comically superhuman feats, but they have a decidedly Finnish anti-authoritarian twist.

Otto Walta was born in Finland and immigrated to the United States in 1898. He moved to the arrowhead region in 1911 and lived alone on a small farm until his death in 1959. Soon after, legends started circulating: "Did you ever here about the giant old Finn who lived out near the big Spruce swamp? He was a regular Paul Bunyan. Strongest man and hardest worker who ever settled around here". In legend, Walta was strong, but more important, he was also clever, and he always did things his own way.

As the story goes, once Otto needed something to help him pull out stumps, so he walked over to the railroad tracks, three miles away, ripped up an 800 pound railroad tie and walked back with it. Using the tie as a lever, Otto pulled the stumps up just like potatoes. Otto legends usually end with the hero outsmarting the rich or powerful. In this tale, the railroad company sent some men to get the railroad tie back. They asked Otto who helped him steal it, ridiculing him when he claimed to have done it alone. Otto then picked up the tie and walked around his field a few times, whereupon the company men decided that Otto might just as well keep his plunder.

Stories like this, while clearly told for fun, in the spirit of the tall tale, also serve a purpose for Finns. The legendary Otto represents a hero who consistently gets the better of people who have authority, and who often are from more powerful ethnic groups. In another story, Otto and his Finnish friends are enjoying a few drinks, and laughing and singing in Finnish. They are stopped by an English policeman, whereupon the powerful Otto lifts the man up bodily, and hooks him to a lamppost by the neck of his jacket. Arrested and taken before a judge, Otto protested that all he hang on the post was a jacket -- he doesn't know where the cop came from. Impressed by his ingenuity, the judge laughs and frees him, leaving the policeman fuming. While other ethnic groups often treat Finns as the butts of their jokes, portraying them as slow and naive, Finns themselves point to their independence and freedom of thought, which are dramatized in the tales of Otto

Walta, the northwoods hero.

Even as folklore can help tell us who "we" are by asserting our ethnic identity, it also is often effective in marking out the boundary of who "we" are not. We all have heard some of the vast range of jokes that stereotype ethnic groups as dumb, dirty, mean, and so on, and jokes are probably the major form of ethnic stereotyping in folklore. But local legends play their part too, although perhaps not as blatantly. Many legends, as we have seen, are about places that are frightening, and frequently the sources of the fright are ghosts and supernatural entities. Sometimes they are other kinds of "aliens." For instance, a popular local legend site near Granite Falls is the "Sanitarium," a large, dilapidated place that once treated tuberculosis patients. (Photo). The building closed in the late 1960s or 1970s, and was apparently abandoned almost intact. The hospital is still full of old, broken furniture, books, newspapers, and clothing, all now destroyed and scattered. The building is marked out as a legend site with graffiti, including purportedly Satanic markings and signs. (Photo). Tales abound of strange sightings, noises, and happenings, and the building is indeed a spooky place. A regular feature of the tales is that the building is or was used by "Satanists," and significantly, these evil-doers are almost always described as Mexicans, who practice vaguely-defined rituals akin to Santeria or Voodoo. Other local legends describe crazy Indians who live in the woods and slaughter youths at summer camps, or gypsies who abduct children in shopping centers. For once again, local legends do not develop randomly, but according to particular concerns and fears. Thus a distrust of Mexican migrant workers surfaces in an apparently unconnected place -- the local teenage legend site.

Ethnic stereotypes also play a role in an interesting kind of local legend found all over the United States, and certainly in Minnesota. Many communities have "Indian legends," attached to them -- legends that are still told by current residents to explain local features or place names. Take White Bear Lake, for example:

There was a village on the shores of the lake. In the middle of the lake is Manitou Island (Manitou means spirit in Indian [sic]). There was this Indian brave and an Indian maiden who were attracted to one another. The Chief, who was the maiden's father, would not allow the two to marry because the Indian brave had not yet proved himself to the tribe. The maiden took a canoe to the island. She wept. There was a big white bear on the island, and when the maiden saw the bear she let out a scream. The Indian brave heard her scream and took another canoe out to the island. He killed the polar bear with a spear. From that moment on he was regarded as a hero in the village. The couple was now allowed to marry. And that is how White Bear Lake, Minnesota, got its name."³⁵

Clearly this tale is fanciful; polar bears have never been a major part of the wild-life of Minnesota! The tale is like many other local legends that involve Indian "maidens" and "braves," although the happy ending is unusual. More commonly, the maiden leaps to her death for love of the brave, as in the legend associated with Maiden Rock in Wisconsin. But the most striking thing about these "Indian" legends, is that almost invariably, they have no provenance in the lore of American Indians themselves. They are, in other words, white cultural constructions. In some cases, they actually originate from commercial sources, such as the legend of Owatonna, which was originally created to sell mineral water:

The princess was the daughter of Chief Wabena, and one winter Princess Owatonna became very sick. Chief Wabena sent right away for Chewalda and his medicine, but unfortunately his medicines did not work. Wabena then prayed to the great Manitou and in a vision was told to take his daughter to the "brown springs that bubble." The braves of the tribe vied for the honor to carry their princess on the journey. They traveled south until they came upon a beautiful area with many trees

and a brook which was fed by the bubbling spring. Chief Wabena told his daughter to 'drink deep and often of this water, and we shall be happy once more. The sparkle will return to your eyes, the flush to your cheek, strength to your limbs, and the laughter to your lips.' Owatonna did so, and miraculously she was healed.

It has been many years since them, but the princess loved the spot so much that after her long and useful life she was buried in the hills overlooking the springs.³⁶

The student who told this story explained that the legend is not part of local Indian lore. As is common with these tales, the names are inconsistent (Wabena is not a name that would have been used among the Dakota), and we see the stereotypical figures of chiefs, princesses/maidens, and braves appearing again. But the legend was taken up by the town with enthusiasm, and a statue of the "princess" graces the local Mineral Springs Park.

Another legend that apparently has gained local acceptance, although its origins are less than traditional is the story of Blue Flower, an "Indian maiden" associated with Lake Geneva near Alexandria. During a field trip to the area, we were told versions of this story, and we later received a further version in the form of a poem. The story tells of a White Cloud, an Ojibwa brave who loves Neewana, the daughter of a Sioux chief, Maukwa. The chief forbids the match, and drives White Cloud away. Later he returns, but is killed by a Sioux arrow. In grief, Neewana drowns herself in Lake Geneva. On the bank from which she leaped, a beautiful blue flower blooms every year for just one day, and whoever finds it will have luck from then on.

In a booklet on the lakes of Alexandria, Lorayne Larson writes that her father knows the origin of this story: "I wrote it as a freshman in Miss Sanford's class at the University of Minnesota. She assigned a local legend, I didn't know one so I made one up!"³⁷ Whether this was true or not, the Lake Geneva tale has all the hallmarks of the other "Indian

legends," that abound in Minnesota.

But why are these "Indian" tales so popular in Minnesota, and elsewhere in the U.S.? Historian Joel Martin offers one explanation. Martin notes that in the South, and in Alabama in particular, people "gave Indian names to most of that state's streams and almost all of the state's rivers, some ten thousand miles of waterways."³⁸ The same phenomenon happened across the south, but always *after* the Native population had actually been removed. In other words, the Indian names were chosen by white people, much as "Indian" legends are white creations. Martin continues: "on a symbolic level, Indian names enabled southerners to claim an archaic connection between themselves and the land. Call a town Irwinton and it might as well be in England or Connecticut. Call it Eufaula and it almost had to be in Alabama or Oklahoma, i.e., a place where Muskogee Indians had lived. An Indian name made it seem as if the new town had been there forever, as if it was okay for whites to be living there ... Indian names were prized possessions, signs that whites used to assert that they had inherited the land and its history. In a deep sense, southern whites were claiming Indian ancestors, even as they repudiated contemporary Indians and denied them their birthright. Actual living Indians had been exiled; fictive dead ones were romanticized. The former was the precondition for the latter, if not the cause."³⁹

Indian legends seem to serve the same purpose as Indian place names. They developed after American Indians ceased to be a significant presence in these communities, but they served to mark the community out as distinctive, as having long ties that "go back into Indian history." Thus communities have stories about "Indian graveyards," that border or lie under their town, such as the "sunken graveyard" that is supposed to exist on the riverside in Faribault. In Little Falls, they tell a story about the grave of Chief Hole in the Day:

The legend is that no tornadoes, no floods, and no earthquakes will ever hit the area unless someone disrupts the grave. In 1975, the city of Little Falls was building a

highway around the town ... the highway was being built right by the grave, and that summer the area of central Minnesota experienced the first flood that had ever occurred. There had never been a natural disaster in this area until the construction started."⁴⁰

In this story, we can clearly see the symbolism of the town's connections with an ancient tradition, a tradition that is threatened when the town tries to change its identity. Frank DeCaro suggests that an "Indian" connection tends to create an aura of authenticity around a story, making it seem more "historical." Like Martin, he also suggests that Indian legends may also serve to appease a lingering sense of guilt at having displaced the original inhabitants, pointing out that the places that developed these legends were those "in which the white inhabitants could indeed afford a noble savage because the Indian no longer posed a threat. They are part of a world safe for tourism, the resort hotel and the summer camp."⁴¹

Indian legends often paint an ambivalent picture of American Indians, seeing them on the one hand as wild, aggressive people who fight constantly among themselves, and potentially threaten whites. Thus many of the "suicide" tales are said to result from the cruelty of warring bands of Indians who refuse to reconcile with each other. At the same time, they tend to laud the "noble savage," the romanticized "brave" or "maiden," who lives close to the earth and fades peacefully away in the face of white advances.⁴² We can see the dual images when we look at two legends focused on the 1861 Dakota uprising in the region around New Ulm. A plaque in the basement of a local restaurant tells the story of how that building was the place where a group of women and children holed up during the fighting, and that one woman was chosen to light the fuse to a barrel of gunpowder if things got really bad, thus killing them all and preventing the Dakota from taking them prisoner. Since then, dozens of families in the area have developed traditions that their ancestor was the heroine who stood ready to defy the "savages." Clearly, this legend serves

to mark out "Us" -- the whites, from "them" -- the wild Indians. At the same time, many local families also claim a different legendary tradition:

Some ancestors of my mother's family line lived on a hill near New Ulm. There lived an Indian family down the hill. My great, great, great aunt heard that one of the Indian children was ill, so she sent a kettle of soup down to them for it was a bad winter. Later on that winter, when the Indians were uprising, they came and warned my aunt and her family and they escaped safely." ⁴³

The details of this story vary from family to family, sometimes involving a mother who gave bread to a starving Indian who came to the door, or some similar variation. In any event, the story serves to identify the family as one that has been in the area a long time, and that furthermore has ties with those who were there even longer.

Conclusion:

In this report, we have only begun to touch on the wealth of Minnesota legends that still flourish all around us. Folklorists have debated for years the issue of "belief" in legends such as these, asking if people really believe these stories of ancient origins, ghosts, and murders. Most likely they do not, at least in the literal way they may believe the stories of the history books. Yet people continue to create and recreate these folk spins on the past. For the meaning of folklore transcends the issue of literal truth -- folk history is symbolic history. It is a tapestry of the fantastic, the "might-have-beens," and the "what-ifs," and the stories come truly alive only at the local site where they are told. Through folk legends, people are exploring their own community -- their awareness of its past, the values it supports or rejects -- and they are asserting their own sense of belonging in that community.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1986; Robert A. Georges & Michael Owen Jones, *Folkloristics: An Introduction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995; Elliott Oring, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986.
2. See Alan Dundes, "What is Folklore?" in Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965.
3. See John J. Poggie & Carl Gersuny, "Risk and Ritual: An Interpretation of Fishermen's Folklore in a New England Community," or Michael J. Bell, "Tending Bar at Brown's: Occupational Role as Artistic Performance," both in Elliott Oring, ed. *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader*, Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1989.
4. William A. Wilson, "Folklore and History: Fact Amid the Legends," in Jan Harold Brunvand, ed., *Readings in American Folklore*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, pp. 449-446.
5. Oring, 1986, p. 16
6. Wilson, p. 358
7. William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 67, 1954, pp. 333-349.
8. See Alan Dundes, "Defining Identity through Folklore," in Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1-39.
9. For a comprehensive survey of these legends see J.H. Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1981, and his numerous further collections, the latest being *The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends*, W.W. Norton, 1993.
10. Where possible, we will quote verbatim from versions of local legends we have collected in

various contexts. Many of these texts come from student collections of folklore undertaken as part of an introductory Folklore course at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. These projects are housed in the Minnesota Folklore Archive at UMD; when these texts are used, an archive reference number is given. Other examples of legends were collected by the authors during field trips to Minnesota locations during the summer of 1995. If no Project number is given, the legend versions were collected during these trips.

11. See, for example, Ronald L. Baker, "Legends about Spook Hill Light," *Indiana Folklore*, 1970; William M. Clements, "The Chain on the Tombstone," *Indiana Folklore: A Reader*, ed. Linda Degh, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980; Gary Hall, William M. Clements & William E. Lightfoot, "The Legend of Stepp Cemetery," *Indiana Folklore*, 5, pp. 92-141; Gary Hall, "The Big Tunnel," *Indiana Folklore: A Reader*, ed. Linda Degh, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, pp. 225-257.

12. See Patrick B. Mullen, "Modern Legend and Rumor Theory," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 9, 1972, pp. 95-109.

13. Project # 806, 1994. Told to a 19-year-old UMD student during a discussion about grade point average.

14. The same site can generate a range of legends, depending on who is telling the story. See S.E. Bird, "playing with Fear: Interpreting the Adolescent Legend trip," *Western Folklore*, analyzing the legend around an ambiguous symbol -- a black angel grave marker. Older people say the angel turned black because of a mother's grieving over the loss of her child, while teenagers attribute it to the adultery of a "loose" woman.

15. Project # 800, 1994

16. This particular grave-site has been the object of a great deal of vandalism in recent years. Legend-trippers have defaced and removed the headstone, defaced the sight, and even

attempted to dig up the grave; for this reason we are not mentioning the location of the site or the family name.

17. Project # 353, 1985

18. Project #888, 1995

19. Project #901, 1995

20. *Janesville Argus*, June 25, 1975

21. See for example, Bird, "Playing with Fear;" Bill Ellis, "Adolescent Legend Tripping,"

Psychology Today, August 1983; Patricia M. Meley, "Adolescent Legend Trips as Teenage Cultural Response: A Study of Lore in Context," *Mid-America Folklore*, 18, 1990, pp. 1-26.

22. Carl Lindahl, "Psychic Ambiguity at the Legend Core," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 23; 1, 1986, pp. 1-21.

23. "Moving Mary" is actually a statue of Jesus in a cemetery in Montevideo. The story goes that if a person drives up close to the statue, and shines car headlights on it, the statues arms will wave up and down. In addition, a pervasive feature of "haunted" sites is described -- that cars will stall and fail to restart, causing terror among the occupants.

24. Harold Weatherhead: *Westward to the St. Croix: The story of St. Croix County, Wisconsin*," St. Croix County Historical Society, Hudson, WI, 1977.

25. Project # 828, 1995

26. Project # 833, 1995

27. Project # 831, 1995

28. *ibid*

29. Project # 916, 1995,

30. Project # 903, 1995

31. Project # 899, 1995

32. Project # 897, 1995.
33. Project #893, 1995.
34. The Otto Walta legends discussed here were told to one of the authors, David Woodward, during fieldwork in Finland, Minnesota
35. Project # 898, 1995
36. Project # 914, 1995
37. Lorayne Larson, *How the Lakes were Named; Alexandria, Minnesota*, published privately, 1965.
38. Joel W. Martin, "My Grandmother was a Cherokee Princess: Representations of Indians in Southern History," in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed. *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1996.
39. *ibid.*
40. Project # 915, 1995
41. Frank DeCaro, "Vanishing the Red Man: Cultural Guilt and Legend Formation," *International Folklore Review*, 4, 1986, p. 77
42. For a collection of essays that documents popular images of American Indians from the 1830s to the present, see Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*..
43. Project # 338, 1981.

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