

THE WHITE LADY OF DEVIL'S ELBOW

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While doing research for my book *Haunted Southern Tier* (2011), I found a relationship between a local “Vanishing Hitchhiker” legend and a murder that took place near Owego, New York about 180 years ago. This legend, “The White Lady of Devil’s Elbow,” raises an interesting question. To what extent can speculation about a violent death that happened many years ago influence the development of a local legend that belongs to a migratory legend pattern? This essay will explore the development of “The White Lady of Devil’s Elbow” from the early 1900s to the present, examining legend texts and reports of “White Lady” pranks played by teenagers. It will also delve into the White Lady’s symbolic meaning, in an effort to explain why she has been important to young people in upstate New York for many years.

Near Owego, New York on Route 17C, some people who have driven past a hill called Devil’s Elbow have claimed to have startling experiences. Legends about these experiences describe a young woman wearing a long white dress. Narrators who learned her story in the early twentieth century have described her as a young Victorian lady carrying calling cards who travels in a horse-drawn carriage. In the 1980s, 1990s, and early twenty-first century, adolescent and young adult narrators have described her as a prom queen or a bride. Before vanishing, she asks the driver to stop at the bottom of Devil’s Elbow Hill. When the driver goes to a nearby house to ask about the young woman, he learns that she died in an accident on the hill many years ago. In some versions he sees her in a portrait, wearing a lovely white dress. From the mid-1920s to the present, teenagers have enjoyed playing pranks with white dresses, using flashlights and other special effects to scare passing motorists.

In 1932, a steam shovel operator digging up some dirt near Devil’s Elbow Hill discovered the skull of a young woman who seemed to have been murdered with an axe or a long, flat board about a hundred years ago. Almost sixty years later, Tioga County historian Thomas C. McEnteer wrote that this young woman, who was killed near the site of a tavern built in the early 1800s, may have become the central character of “White Lady” legends. McEnteer suggests that belief in a “real ghost” has grown from this evidence of a local murder but that clever pranks, such as a teenaged girl standing below Devil’s Elbow Hill wearing a white dress covered in Scotch-Lite tape, have made the ghost seem less serious and less believable (1990, 750).

My own fieldwork with Owego area residents during the past two years has resulted in a different conclusion: both legends about the murder and pranks by teenagers have encouraged belief in “White Lady” legends. All of the people who have talked with me about the murder have found it to be a significant event closely connected to “White Lady” legends. I have learned two versions of the story of the young woman’s murder around 1832. The first version explains that the young woman was killed by a rough, drunken tavern visitor after going out

alone, while the second states that both she and her husband died at the hands of a greedy tavern owner who had stolen their cow (or cows) and did not want to give up his new livestock. The second version is, of course, more prosaic than the first; the murder of a married couple in order to keep a cow or cows seems less mysterious and troubling than the murder of a lone woman near a tavern. As Jan Harold Brunvand has noted, horror legends tend to emphasize the vulnerability of young women and men who go out on their own, especially at night (1981, 11). Legends about young women dying after going out alone deliver warnings about staying safe and following guidelines for proper behavior. This legend pattern has been firmly established in American culture.

Since American legends tend to emphasize dangers for young women, it is not surprising that few of the legend texts I have collected in recent years mention a husband. Over time, Owego's "White Lady" legends seem to have become more like other "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legends that are well known across the United States. The legend cycle explicated by Brunvand (1981) and others generally features one person (usually a woman but sometimes, in "Jesus Hitchhiker" versions, a man) hitchhiking alone. The following "White Lady" legend, told by my student and Owego area resident Irene in 2004, includes a husband whose body vanishes:

A long time ago, on a dark and stormy night, a newlywed couple was driving over Devil's Elbow Hill Road. It was so foggy that they never saw the headlights of the oncoming truck—the groom's body flew out of the car on impact. The body was never found. The bride, however, was crushed in the car. She died instantly. Sometimes, on a dark and stormy night, if the fog is just thick enough, you will see the bride standing in the road waiting for her groom to join her. Just for reference, Devil's Elbow is called that for a specific reason. The road goes almost vertically up to a point and down again very steeply. The road isn't in use any more, but the story is still told and some have even been said to see a white figure standing on the old abandoned road. Devil's Elbow Hill is located on the way to Waverly, New York if you're taking old 17.

Perhaps this vanishing husband is a vestige of the murder story that includes both a husband and a wife. Only the wife becomes a visible ghost, although the husband presumably dies too: an indication that the young woman's plight requires more attention than her husband's does. This "White Lady" variant and others focus on young women who die after a wedding or prom. The sudden downshift from joy to tragedy highlights life's fragility and warns young women to be careful.

Somewhat similarly, teenagers' pranks combine joy with tragedy; besides giving kids the chance to have some illicit fun, they highlight deaths and hauntings described in local legends and films. Scholars of children's and adolescents' folklore have noted the shock value of such pranks and the importance of the link between the legend and the prank or joke. Sheldon Posen's "Pranks and Practical

Jokes at Children's Summer Camps," for example, describes the dramatic impact of a ghost seeming to appear immediately after its legend is told (1974, 303-9). Linda Dégh's "Symbiosis of Joke and Legend: A Case of Conversational Folklore" (1976) shows how easily people can move from horror to humor when discussing local legends. I have studied "Scary Maze Game" pranks, in which a child or adolescent frightens a younger sibling by making him or her play an Internet game in which the face of Linda Blair from *The Exorcist* suddenly pops up on the screen (Tucker 2011). Such pranks have given their players so much pleasure that they have become the subjects of YouTube videos for the entertainment of friends and others: an audience that seems to be virtually limitless.

Researching "Scary Maze Game" videos and comments online has helped me understand the relationship between fright and delight in young people's prank playing. A prank that suddenly scares someone belongs to the broad category of *ilinx* play: the kind of play defined by Roger Caillois (1961) as vertigo-inducing playful behavior. In contrast to *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), and mimicry (simulation), *ilinx* subjects the player to dizziness and disorientation. Swinging or twirling on a merry-go-round can cause dizziness; so can the sudden appearance of something shocking and/or frightening. Ghosts that appear quickly not only shock viewers through the rapidity of their appearance, but also scare them by bringing to mind tragic events delineated in legends. The child or adolescent who plays the prank can enjoy the pleasure of victimization, while the one upon whom the prank is played may enjoy the stimulation of getting scared and can certainly take pride later on in having survived that process.

Since scary pranks tend to be highly memorable, they reinforce awareness of legends and films to which they are related. I have learned, while talking with students of mine who lived in the Owego area during their teenaged years, that "White Lady" pranks sharpen young people's awareness of local legends. In order to play a good prank related to this legend, it is necessary to know the legend's details well. After the prank takes place, the story of its occurrence—either by its players or by others—refers to aspects of the legend that local residents find to be important, as well as highlighting the audaciousness of the kids who dared to go out on the road to scare drivers passing by.

Owego teenagers' "White Lady" pranks have ranged from simple displays of a white dress at the base of Devil's Elbow Hill to elaborate use of flashlights, reflecting tape, pulleys, ropes, and other materials. Since flashing lights can cause accidents at night, local police have pursued and, in some cases, apprehended "White Lady" prank-players (McEnteer 1990, 750). Since police have gone after these pranksters, the stakes of playing such pranks have become very high. According to my students, successful "White Lady" prank-players have earned admiration from friends for their bravery, especially around Halloween.

Besides tracing the development of these local legends and pranks, I have wondered why legends about the young female ghost of Devil's Elbow have kept the descriptive term "*white*." All of her outfits—visiting dress, prom dress, and wedding gown—are white, a color that suggests innocence and joy. *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular periodical from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, includes lyric poems such as "Leura" by Anson G. Chester, in which a young woman

receives praise for having “a brow pure as snow-flakes/From Winter's white wing” (1850). White wedding dresses have been common in England and the United States since 1840, when Queen Victoria married Prince Albert. Unlike Queen Victoria, the White Lady is a young woman alone (or at least separated from her husband) on a dangerous country road next to a hill with an evil-sounding name. Perhaps she wears white to show that she represents goodness and proper female behavior that will resist the Devil's influence. Her story works well as a warning legend for young women, reminding them to preserve their safety, innocence, and happiness.

Another reason for the White Lady's persistence may be the prominence in the Owego area of German immigrants, including some from southern Germany. German immigrants have also settled in nearby Pennsylvania, which has a “White Lady” legend associated with a curve called “Devil's Elbow” on Wopsononock (Wopsy) Mountain. The famous German legend of the “White Lady,” about a countess who kills her two children after coming to the conclusion that her husband will not let them live, originated from Schloss Plassenburg in Bavaria in the fourteenth century. Like other “la llorona” legends, this one emphasizes the horror of a mother killing her own offspring. Although scholars have determined that the Countess Kunigunde of Plassenburg never had children, the story of her child-killing has been remarkably durable and is still told by guides at Schloss Plassenburg today (Nickell). In his scholarly study *Die Weisse Frau* (1984 [1931]), Martin Wachler mentions that members of the Plassenburg court used to dress up as the White Lady to scare people away from the castle. Young people who heard stories about pranks of this kind may have tried similar pranks of their own. Even if they didn't play pranks, they knew the legends and could tell them to their own children later on.

Any ghost that insists on staying in one place for hundreds of years accrues multiple layers of meaning. In *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (2003), Judith Richardson analyzes information about the ghost of a young woman from the village of Leeds who has been important to her community for almost 250 years. This young woman, Anna Dorothea Swarts, was the black, German, Scottish, Spanish, or Indian servant or slave of a rich man named William Salisbury; she died after her master beat her and had her dragged behind a horse in 1762. Although not all the facts of this woman's terrible death are known, it is clear that her ghost is as firmly attached to the place where she died as the White Lady's ghost is to Devil's Elbow Hill. Richardson notes that “the ghost is both vestige and novelty, positive and negative, powerful and powerless, a possessing force that descends upon the town and through history, and something passive that is possessed” (123). This intriguing set of antitheses reminds us that ghosts are powerful and enigmatic beings who do not give up easily. It may be difficult for us to understand their motivations, but if they stick around for many years, we can feel sure that they have a reason for staying; and that reason probably goes beyond the traditional idea that ghosts like to haunt the locations of their deaths.

There are plenty of reasons why the White Lady persistently haunts Devil's Elbow. Representing young women's hopes for safety, respectability, and joy, she

guards a dangerous curve next to the site of a tavern where a young woman died violently and was buried furtively during the town's early days. Is the White Lady herself this young woman? Some townspeople, including the county historian, think she is. It is also possible to view her as a spiritual descendant of the White Lady of Schloss Plassenburg, who suffered from a difficult relationship with her husband, killed her own children, and gradually became a frightening figure for members of the court. The thread that connects this fourteenth-century countess to the twenty-first-century bride or prom queen is young women's suffering, which takes many forms and leaves a lasting legacy. The "la llorona" legend pattern is an especially important part of this history. Although the local "White Lady" legend that I have studied does not include death of a child or children, its counterpart in Pennsylvania does.

Teenagers' perception of our local White Lady tends to be more upbeat. For high school students who live near Owego now, the White Lady is both familiar and strange, a famous ghost who makes both kids and adults shiver around Halloween. Kids with an adventurous spirit may want to play a "White Lady" prank or two, because this ghost isn't just scary; she's also fun to imitate and encourages escapes from the police. From a kid's perspective, the White Lady is a cool community member who is there to stay.

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