

The Thousandth Happy Haunt: Legends of Burial and Haunting at Disneyland's Haunted Mansion

DAVID GILES

Utah State University

"Welcome, Foolish Mortals":¹ Introduction

One of the most iconic attractions at Disneyland is the strangely compelling (and, given its oddly morbid tone, somewhat out-of-place) Haunted Mansion. The Mansion is what is commonly known as a "dark ride"—that is, an indoor, slow-moving, special-effects-heavy ride kept mostly in darkness (hence, a "*dark ride*") (see Figure 1). Such rides tend to focus more on an automated show that the riders pass by or through, rather than on the physical experience of the ride itself (unlike, say, a roller coaster or a merry-go-round). The Haunted Mansion, in particular, is a child-friendly haunted house ride (though anecdotal evidence suggests that many young children would take issue with this description): that is, it has a spooky atmosphere, but lacks many traditional "horror" motifs such as gore, violent murders, demonic possessions, and the like, and those few that remain are quickly defused by comic relief or dark humor.

One of the most memorable moments in the Mansion comes during the opening walkthrough segment, before riders climb aboard the "Doom Buggies" that will take them on their tour of the house. While walking down a spooky hallway decorated with shifting portraits, creepy wallpaper, and busts that seem to watch the guests as they pass, the Ghost Host, the ride's disembodied narrator, describes some of the Mansion's residents: "We have nine hundred and ninety-nine happy haunts here," he says. "But," he adds ominously, "there's room for a thousand. Any volunteers?" (Atencio and Baker 2005)

Over the years, a surprising number of guests have apparently sought to take the Host up on his invitation, as the Mansion has become the site of a rather macabre brand of ostension. Specifically, legends claim that many park guests have spread the ashes of their loved ones inside the ride—and, if the tales are to be believed, at least one of them has stuck



Figure 1 Example of a “dark ride” scene, taken from the beginning of the Haunted Mansion’s graveyard sequence. Before passing into the graveyard proper, which contains a whole host of celebrating ghosts, guests pass by the gravedigger and his dog, both shaking uncontrollably. Note the lack of lighting, which gives “dark rides” their name. Source: Decaro, 2013.

around as a permanent member of the Mansion’s “swinging wake.” The juxtaposition between these two very different images—death and Disneyland, fake ghosts and real burials—is intriguing, to say the least. Studying these legends and trying to figure out what they say, not only about Disneyland, but about the fans who, apparently, want to have their ashes scattered there, teaches us much about those who would, as the ride’s theme song encourages, “join [the] jamboree” (Atencio and Baker 2005).

“The Boundless Realm of the Supernatural”: Foundations and Folklore
The Haunted Mansion was actually planned for Disneyland from the very beginning. When Walt Disney² first began to formulate the idea for a “Mickey Mouse Park,” he asked one of the Disney artists, Harper Goff, to sketch out some initial plans, and explicitly instructed that he include a “church graveyard and haunted house” in the illustration (Baham 2014: 4). The idea of a “Ghost House” of some kind persisted, with early concept art (including a 1953 concept map used to sell the idea of Disneyland to investors) locating it just off Main Street, USA, close to

the park entrance. Despite these intentions, the Mansion did not actually make it into the park by opening day; instead, it was included in the plans for the first major expansion to Disneyland, New Orleans Square. Construction on the Mansion began in 1962, with the Mansion's façade being completed in 1963; however, due to a number of production delays (including preparations for the 1964 World's Fair and the death of Walt Disney in 1966), the ride itself would not open until 1969 (Baham 2014:5).

Neal Gabler describes how, when Walt was designing Disneyland, he sought to capture the popular ideal of whatever it was he was working on at the time: for example, he describes Sleeping Beauty's Castle, which forms the heart of the park, as "the Platonic castle of everyone's imaginations" (Gabler 2007: 498). Apparently, this design philosophy carried over to the Haunted Mansion as well, for the Mansion is very carefully designed to encapsulate the folkloric image of the haunted house. Sylvia Ann Grider, in her essay "Haunted Houses," describes this image:

Depictions of the archetypal haunted house contain some combination of the following distinctive motifs: multistoried, mansard or gambrel roof, turrets or towers, and broken or boarded-up windows with "spooky" inhabitants peeking out. Furthermore, the darkened house is generally on an isolated hilltop, surrounded by a high broken fence, with leafless dead trees and/or a witch on a broomstick silhouetted against a full moon.

... Once inside the haunted house, the action of the ghost story usually takes place in the attic or the basement or on the connecting staircase, locations rich with psychological symbolism of isolation and evil. [Grider 2007:147; 152]

The Haunted Mansion conforms with surprising regularity to this description. The façade³ of the Mansion is built in a Southern Colonial style, chosen so as to appear alien to a primarily-Californian audience; it does, indeed, boast multiple stories, and carries a small turret on top (Baham 2014:78). It also sits on a small rise—definitely not Grider's "isolated hilltop," but enough of a climb so that guests have to look upwards to actually see the structure, earning, to some extent, the same effect. Furthermore, the three interior locations described feature prominently in the narrative of the ride: the Doom Buggies begin the ride by ascending a staircase; the attic, packed with all kinds of junk, is where the riders meet the murderous bride, one of the ride's more memorable characters; and the famous "hitchhiking ghosts" that see the guests off



Figure 2 The hearse parked outside the Mansion. Note the partially-obscured horse tack, to the right of the frame; the tack suggests the presence of a ghostly horse to the guests. Source: Decaro, 2007.

are encountered in an underground crypt, which answers quite nicely for a basement.

The Mansion does depart from Grider's description in a few important details—most importantly, the apparent condition of the façade. The archetypal haunted house is in grave disrepair, but the Haunted Mansion is immaculately maintained, reportedly on the insistence of Walt Disney himself. Walt, recalling memories of dirty, unkempt amusement parks that may have inspired his desire to build Disneyland in the first place, insisted that everything in Disneyland appear pristine at all times. However, the designers were able to work around this restriction in a number of ways. For one, the Mansion's yard is surrounded by a low, red-brick wall, topped with intricate wrought-iron fencing—not broken-down by any means, but still imposing, with the gaps in the wrought iron perhaps suggesting the gaps in the archetypal run-down fence. Additionally, the Mansion is built in a grove of magnolia trees, carefully arranged to partially obscure the Mansion itself. Though these trees still have their leaves, their veiling presence adds to the intimidating, mysterious nature of the structure. The yard is also creatively landscaped with plants that appear unkempt and alien, even when properly maintained; these include close-packed mondo grass (suggesting an overgrown lawn), medusa's head in vases around the property, and several varieties "weeping" trees, including weeping mulberry and weeping juniper (Baham 2014:77). Finally, though no ghostly visitors can be seen in the windows, an antique funeral hearse⁴

drawn by an invisible horse (suggested by its elaborate tack, which hangs motionless in the air) is parked in front of the Mansion (see Figure 2). Once inside the structure, the required disrepair is more apparent—thick cobwebs cover every surface, with flickering, dripping candles all along the walls—but the exterior remains sufficiently spooky, even without having to resort to such props.

This attention to detail apparently paid off, for, within months of its opening, the Haunted Mansion had already become the site of some rather grim folklore. Six months after the ride opened, the elevators hidden in the Stretching Rooms, which lowered the guests from ground level down to the underground ride track, suddenly stopped working. After some investigation, park workers realized that a crack in the lining of the nearby Rivers of America attraction was allowing water to leak into the elevator shafts, shorting out the motors, which would require a lengthy repair of both the Haunted Mansion and the Rivers of America. Guests, however, were not aware of the maintenance problems, and began to spread rumors that the ride was so scary that it had given a guest a heart attack, which necessitated a complete remodel of the ride (Koenig 2002:111).⁵ Though legends such as these are interesting in their own right, I find the fact that they exist at all even more important: Disneyland worked hard to create a haunted house in line with what its guests expected to see, and they were so successful that, within months of opening, the guests had already begun to supply their own ghosts.

Given this folklorically-charged atmosphere, it is somewhat curious to note how the Mansion was actually advertised. Early reports repeatedly emphasized that ghosts (which, of course, could not be *native* to Disneyland) were being recruited to populate the Mansion, with many such ads actually inviting ghosts to apply for positions. One such source is Walt Disney's 1958 interview with the BBC, in which he stated, among other things, that ghosts needed to re-enact "their crimes" for mortals for a certain amount of time before they could move on, and that Disneyland would provide the best possible audience for such demonstrations. He even took pains to invite "the disenfranchised ghosts of England," whose "old houses were torn down and ... [who had] no place to go," to "come to California" (Baham, 2014:26). A more immediate invitation once stood outside the Mansion itself: to help explain the ride's apparently-vacant façade, a sign was hung from a wrought-iron frame out front, advertising the benefits of (un-)life in the Mansion, and concluding with an invitation for interested ghosts to send their resumes to the Disneyland Ghost Relations Department. "Please!" it added, "Do not apply in person" (Baham 2014:44). An abbreviated version of this sign remains today: a small card, displayed inside the hearse in front of the Mansion, advertises that reservations for future

residents are still being accepted at the Ghost Relations department—once again, pleading that interested parties “*Please* do not apply in person!” (emphasis in original) (ibid.). This is not to mention the Ghost Host’s requests for volunteers to fill a vacancy, nor the so-called Ghost Hostess, a small, female figure located by the exit who, as the guests are leaving, invites them to “Hurry back ... [with their] death certificate[s]” (Atencio and Baker 2005). The placement of these two invitations—one before the ride has actually started, and one after it has ended—greatly emphasizes the apparent fact that Disneyland is more than happy to have the ghosts of the recently deceased living in their park. Given how insistent Disney has been that they are looking for more ghosts, perhaps they should not be entirely surprised that some guests have chosen, at least in the folklore, to stick around.

“Is This Haunted Room *Actually* Stretching?”: Factuality and Genre

I have been researching the topic of ash scatterings at the Haunted Mansion for some time, ever since a relative brought the issue to my attention in 2015. Since starting on this topic, I have had several discussions with colleagues, research subjects, and casual acquaintances about whether or not such ash scatterings actually happen. Every time, my answer has been the same: circumstantial evidence suggests that, yes, people *do* scatter ashes at Disneyland, and much more often than one might suppose. However, without access to first-person accounts of such scatterings, nor an official statement from Disney on the matter, I was unwilling to make a definitive statement on whether or not these legends were true. However, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* has complicated that analysis significantly. In this section, I would like to amend my earlier thoughts, and yet justify my rationale for leaving my methodology largely unchanged.

Legends of ash scatterings are not new: reports of ash scatterings have been in the media for almost two decades, although I suspect they first appeared long before that. The earliest mention I can find of an in-park ash scattering comes from David Koenig’s book *Mouse Tales*, in which he relates an account of a 2002 scattering from the perspective of a Disneyland cast member.⁶ This account is remarkable in its specificity, and includes information such as dates, references to current events, and even the numbers of the ride cars used by the scatterers (Koenig 2006:141). Another specific incident was reported in 2007 by Al Lutz of Disney fansite *Mice Age*, which took place at the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, a short distance away from the Haunted Mansion (Lutz 2007). This later incident was actually picked up by local news agencies and attracted enough attention to prompt an official response from a Disney spokesperson (Yoshino 2007; Shoetz 2007).

In my initial analysis, I noted that these incidents suggested that, in fact, people *did* scatter ashes at Disneyland, but that the accounts themselves contained enough contradictions and uncertainties to leave room for speculation. For example, the woman who scattered powder in the Pirates ride claimed she was scattering baby powder, not human ashes (Lutz 2007). Further, the Disney spokesperson claimed, not that people did not scatter ashes, but that Disney could not confirm whether any powder they found was actually human remains or not (Shoetz 2007). Given this air of uncertainty, I chose to research and write about these ash scatterings, not as actual folkloric practice, but as legends with at least a marginal basis in fact.

However, *The Wall Street Journal* has done their own research on the issue and has come to a different conclusion. On October 24, 2018, *WSJ* author Erich Schwartzel published an article titled “Disney World’s Big Secret: It’s A Favorite Spot To Scatter Family Ashes.” In the article, Schwartzel provides first-person accounts from park guests about their scattering of loved ones’ ashes at the parks (both at Disneyland and -World, despite the title), something that I was missing in my earlier analysis. These accounts are often quite touching and focus on the scatterer’s attempts to memorialize and celebrate the lives of their loved ones at the places they loved most in life. For example, one woman scattered her mother’s ashes in the It’s A Small World ride, near a character that always made her laugh. The article also provides specific details about how these people had smuggled ashes past security—for example, by hiding them in prescription medicine bottles or in the bottom of camera bags. Schwartzel even went so far as to get information from the park janitors, describing how “vacuuming up human ashes is a signature and secret part of working at the Happiest Place on Earth” (Schwartzel 2018).

In my mind, this article lays the issue to rest rather definitively—these ash scatterings do indeed happen, and with some frequency (“about once a month,” per the article). However, I still feel that more can be gained by examining, not the *practice* of ash scatterings, but the *legends told* about said scatterings. Part of this value is simply practical—it is easier to find people who have heard about ash scatterings than people who have scattered ashes themselves—but there is more to it than that. As I describe below, the legends appear to have taken on a life of their own, and now serve purposes more wide-ranging than simply conveying information, as the *WSJ* accounts do. For this reason, I will continue to focus my analysis on legends of ash scatterings, instead of the relatively sparse (though still valuable) memorates of ash scatterers.

Finally, I would like to address one potential theoretical approach. Though this discussion of death and burial may invoke ideas of dark

tourism, I would argue that the impulses behind these activities are very different. Dark tourists travel to places with histories of violence or death to gain “insight on death and related activities,” which modern society has insulated them from (Podoshen 2013:268). Though the Haunted Mansion does feature some elements of violence (e.g., the hanging corpse in the Stretching Room and the murderous bride in the attic), the Haunted Mansion is transparently inauthentic, which, in my mind, lessens its thanatouristic appeal. Though the morbid atmosphere may draw some dark tourists, I would argue that most guests are motivated by other desires—for example, to memorialize loved ones, or to visit the site as legend trippers.

“If You Would Like to Join Our Jamboree”: The Scattering Legends

If you know where to listen, you will hear the stories everywhere: books that purport to tell the “true story” of Disneyland will often tell you about the ash scatterings, as will internet articles that claim secrets “*They*” do not want you to know. Ask a dedicated fan what they have heard, and they will tell you about them; ask a Disneyland employee, and they will tell you about them, too, often in greater detail than even the fans. And they will all say it: visitors to Disneyland are scattering ashes of their loved ones inside the Haunted Mansion.

The stories are all largely the same, and, though the individual tales are remarkable on their own, their implications are more than a little disturbing. Here is one sample, gathered from a former cast member:

Well, I’ve heard ... at least a couple of times a month, people are taking in ashes, and trying to scatter them in the ride ... then, of course, everyone is like, ‘oh, the ashes are haunting the Mansion!’ but, y’know, you can never prove that. And what the public doesn’t know is that [the ashes] just get swept up or vacuumed up. The public for the most part doesn’t know that. So they just think all these ashes are in [the ride], somewhere. [Liz 2015]

In my research, I have managed to collect 11 accounts of ash scatterings from a number of sources, including interviews with fans and employees, fan-published books and blogs, news reports, and one account in particular gleaned from a conversation with a Mansion employee. Some of these accounts took place at the nearby Pirates of the Caribbean attraction, and one in the Haunted Mansion at Walt Disney World, in Florida; these accounts have been included in my analysis as supplementary research. As stated previously, the majority of these accounts are second- or third-hand recounting of stories heard elsewhere; the one exception is the previously-described news story of the 2007 ash

scattering at Pirates of the Caribbean, which was reported as a first-hand encounter, at least with the aftermath of the scattering.

In my analysis, I have noticed several characteristics common among these accounts. From these characteristics, I have assembled a brief overview of what the typical ash scattering legend looks like, arranged into five incidents. Not all accounts feature each incident—for example, several of the accounts I found ended at “Yes, people scatter ashes.” That said, each account relates at least one of the following five incidents, with most including at least a couple of them:

1) *A guest scatters ashes.* Nearly every one of these accounts begins *in medias res*, with the scattering or discovery of ashes. In many cases, the scatterer is actually explicitly described as doing the scattering, but, in others, the scattering is implied; in these cases, the ashes are most often not discovered until much later (for example, one account, found on *Mice Age*, describes an enormous pile of ashes not found until closing time) (Lutz 2007). In either case, background details on both the scatterer and the deceased are sparse, if they are given at all.

2) *An employee tries to stop the guest, to no avail.* In some stories, an employee working the ride notices the scatterer either before or during the scattering itself and attempts to stop them (usually addressing the scatterer over the in-ride intercom). In such cases, the employee is always ignored. No account I collected included the scatterer prematurely stopping their scattering, or an employee or fellow guest preventing them from continuing.

3) *The scatterer disappears.* Even when the scatterer is clearly seen on camera—and even in one account, the 2007 incident at the Pirates of the Caribbean, when employees actually stopped and questioned the scatterer—the scatterer is always able to avoid punishment and disappear into the crowd (Lutz 2007). In many cases, especially when the scattering is not noticed until afterwards, the scatterer is not seen by the employees at all. In either case, the scatterer remains almost—if not entirely—anonymous.

4) *The ride is temporarily closed.* If the ashes are noticed during the regular operating day, the ride is closed. Guests currently on the ride are allowed to finish and exit normally, but no new riders are allowed on. Almost always, ambiguous “health and safety concerns” are cited as the reason for the closure, with a smaller emphasis on the cleanliness of the ride.

5) *The ashes are vacuumed up.* After the ashes are discovered, employees clean up the scattered ashes with a vacuum. Several specify that Disneyland has a specialized HEPA filter vacuum, which is used to trap the particulate matter (one of my informants described it as a “shop vac” style vacuum, rather than the traditional upright model). It is not

uncommon for these accounts to stress the mundanity or irony of the situation: despite what romantic visions the scatterer may have had for their deceased loved ones, the employees simply vacuum them away. I should add that no account specified what happens to the ashes after they are vacuumed up—that is, it is not clear whether the ashes are disposed of “properly,” or simply go in the trash with the rest of the garbage.

Usually, only a few of these points are included in the accounts I have collected: as stated, many of my accounts consisted of a simple statement like “People scatter ashes.” Of the 11 stories I have found, including the published and supplemental accounts I described, the most commonly featured elements, from most- to least-featured, were “the guest scatters ashes” (all 11 accounts), “the ashes are vacuumed” (seven), “the ride is closed” (six), and “the scatterer disappears” and “an employee tries to stop the guest” (two each).

I should mention that a few of these elements can be implied: for example, “the guest disappears” is only made explicit in two accounts, but the guest vanishes from the narrative after the scattering in seven more cases.

“Materializing the Disembodied”: Analysis and Application

While reviewing these stories, I noticed several striking details that can teach us much about those who tell them. Universally, each account is told from the perspective of the employees—that is, these stories tend to feature a scatterer that remains part of the faceless crowd until they start to misbehave, give little detail about the background of the scatterer or the deceased, and put a disproportionate emphasis on the cleanup process. Further, every Disneyland employee I spoke to knew of these stories, and many could relate them in some detail; in contrast, most of the guests I approached for these same stories had never heard of them. For these reasons, I believe that these legends originate among park employees, and spread outside the park itself primarily through those close contact with an employee (e.g., via friends, family members, or frequent guests).

With this idea in mind, these stories begin to reveal a great deal about the employee culture of Disneyland. For one thing, each of these stories is primarily a narrative of disempowerment: in nearly every one, the employees are powerless to stop the scatterings, or to punish—or even to *locate*—the scatterer. To me, this makes these stories feel like persecution legends—that is, “these dumb tourists are ruining our park, and we can do nothing to stop them.”

These stories reveal something a little deeper as well: a reaction to certain elements of Disney corporate policy. In both *Mouse Tales* books, author David Koenig takes special glee in relating tales of rude,

dishonest, uncooperative, and even violent guests. At the same time, he takes pains to describe how staff can be reprimanded, even fired, if they receive negative feedback from those same guests, which leads to employees being afraid of standing up to all but the most out-of-line tourists (Koenig 2006:133). Additionally, a number of sources, including Koenig, suggest that, in the name of good customer service, staff members are prohibited from restraining or detaining the guests in any way, and, further, must follow a Disney-approved “script,” which forbids the use of words like “No” and “I don’t know.” Such a script would remove the cast members’ ability to offer even token resistance to such guests, leaving them feeling even more powerless.

These factors apparently combine to create a work environment in which employees are *afraid* of the guests. The massive crowds—up to 12 million guests a year, by some estimates—all too often run roughshod over the park and its employees, and, both due to corporate policy and out of fear of losing their jobs, the employees must watch helplessly as they do so. This feeling of powerlessness, I am sure, is a frequent topic of discussion, in one form or another, in the various break rooms of Disneyland. The sharing of such stories is suggested, not only by the content of the stories themselves, but by parallel studies regarding occupational folklore, especially Robert McCarl’s work on firemen (1985).

According to McCarl, many of the narratives shared between firemen are rather shocking in their content and tone. After relating an incident in which several firemen, talking together about past fires, talked about burned human corpses in dehumanizing, almost insulting ways, McCarl pointed out that such stories served an important social function: these stories were “a matter of conditioning and exposure aimed at achieving emotional distance ... By collectively and openly experiencing the past encounters of other group members, and even joking about them, fire fighters prepare themselves for future encounters with fire victims.” Further, the “apparent levity” of these narratives allows for “a culturally sanctioned release for this grizzly [sic] possibility” (McCarl 1985:199). Koenig, in his work on Disneyland, collected items of similar content and function: among Disneyland employees, many in-park accidents are attributed to the stupidity of guests, and that such accidents, especially grisly ones, often result in jeers, jokes and songs. As an example, in 1984, a woman named Dolly was killed on the Matterhorn Bobsleds, apparently because she removed her safety belt during the ride. After the accident, employees named the location of her death “Dolly’s Dip,” and made up songs about her to the tune of “Hello Dolly” (Koenig 2006:195). Though Koenig appears to view these tales as a form of dark humor at the victim’s expense, McCarl’s work provides a different interpretation:

that these stories are means of releasing negative emotions and mentally preparing oneself for future encounters with difficult guests.

In this light, tales told of ash-scattering guests, though much less bloody than stories of deaths and mutilations, may serve a similar function. That is, talking about guests pushing the boundaries of Disney's hospitality to the absolute limit may help cast members relieve stress from negative encounters, and better prepare themselves for future encounters with the *hoi polloi*.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the peculiar nature of some of the narratives I collected. As I said, a number of narratives I collected began and ended with "Yes, people scatter ashes." These short narratives bring to mind Bill Ellis's "half-lives of legend," which describe five stages of a legend's life cycle; stage four is "Metonym," in which the legend is reduced to a small snippet of the original tale, which, in a community familiar with the narrative, is enough to stand for a full retelling (Ellis 2001:64). To be fair, my method of questioning may have inadvertently signaled insider status (e.g., "Have you heard the stories about the ash scatterings at the Haunted Mansion?"), which may have prompted a disproportionate number of metonymic retellings. In either case, the prevalence of these metonyms makes me think that these legends are rather mature: they suggest that crazy guests are no recent phenomena, and legends about them even less so.

"An Aura of Foreboding": An Account from the Mansion's Staff

There is one last account I would like to discuss, one which I have largely omitted from my previous analysis. This narrative is simultaneously the most authoritative and the most problematic that I collected, especially given the circumstances under which it was given. Specifically, I was able to have an informal, unrecorded interview with a couple of employees of the Mansion itself—and their account contradicts the above analysis in several important, and illuminating, points.

During an April 2015 trip to Disneyland, I made a point of visiting the Mansion several times to do research for this paper. While there, I managed to find two Haunted Mansion employees standing outside the attraction. I approached them, briefly introduced myself, and launched right into my interrogation, asking them a number of detailed, rapid-fire questions about ashes in the Mansion—when, where, how often, and so on.

Unfortunately, my approach had an unintended side-effect: I think I gave them the impression that I wanted to scatter ashes myself, and was using this opportunity to "case the joint," so to speak. Though one of the employees, an older man, readily answered my questions about procedures and so forth (with some interjections from his younger

female coworker), he was rather aggressive in his answers, which makes me think he was trying to scare me off of my apparently intended course of action. Interestingly, the answers he gave still matched in broad outline with my other accounts, despite the fact that they differed significantly in tone and intent.

In response to my questions, this employee informed me that yes, indeed, ashes are scattered at the Haunted Mansion, perhaps as often as two or three times a month. However, he said, the employees are able to catch every single scatterer on camera, either just before or during the scattering. When they spot a scatterer, the employees issue a verbal warning over the in-ride intercom (according to the young lady, something along the lines of “Your tour is being monitored”), which is usually enough to deter most scatterers. When a scatterer persists, however, employees alert the “authorities” (probably park security), then pause the seven-minute ride to give them time to arrive.⁷ The authorities then catch the scatterer at the exit to the ride and escort them from the park. Employees must then shut down the ride and vacuum up the ashes before it can be reopened.

In this account, some of the important details outlined above are obviously changed—most importantly, the scatterer is caught, rather than disappearing into the crowd—but the difference I find most striking is the change in tone. As I said, the majority of the legends I gathered were stories of disempowerment (e.g., “the unwashed masses are too much for us”), however, this account is a story of *empowerment* (to paraphrase Liam Neeson from *Taken*, “We have a very particular set of equipment, and we will find you, and we will catch you”). Though it is difficult to draw conclusions from a single account, especially given the circumstances in which it was collected, I have the impression that this narrative may be indicative of the stories the employees of the Mansion tell each other.

If this is the case, this story tells us a lot about those who work at the Mansion: specifically, it portrays the Mansion employees as much more competent (and successful) than other accounts, a marked difference from the helplessness I described earlier. Besides the obvious difference in who is telling the story (the teller is also, in some sense, the subject), I feel this change marks an important difference in attitude. For most employees, there is an element of distance in these tales: they can tell these stories about a public gone mad and shake their heads, because it is not happening to *them*. In contrast, the Mansion employees find themselves at ground zero for these tales, among the grisliest told about the park. Tales like this one seem to be a reassurance—or a determination—that they do, indeed, have control over their home turf, and that they can, and will, protect it from those to seek to do it harm.

“Sympathetic Vibrations”: The Boy in Red

Closely related to the legends of ash scatterings are the stories of the Boy in Red, a ghost who, reportedly, had his mortal remains scattered at the Haunted Mansion. For this reason, no analysis of ash scatterings at the Mansion would be complete without at least a mention of the Boy.

The Boy in Red is so named for his distinguishing feature—a red article of clothing, most often a jacket (which would make him stand out from the artificial ghosts of the attraction, each of which are painted in ghostly blues and greens). The Boy himself is said to appear in several different locations: some claim he can be seen in the Mansion’s exterior windows (which are nothing more than glass and paint, with no space behind them for anyone to stand), some say he wanders between the Haunted Mansion and the nearby Pirates of the Caribbean attraction (which, legends claim, used actual human bones as props for many years), and some say that he just wanders the more general New Orleans Square area, containing both the Mansion and the Pirates ride. However, the Boy is most often said to be confined to the Mansion itself, and that he can be heard by the exit of the ride, crying “as if [he is] unable to get out, and desperately want[s] to” (Jensen 2011).

The stories surrounding the Boy in Red are, by and large, very similar. In life, the Boy was a big fan of Disneyland. However, he was terminally ill (some stories specify cancer or leukemia), and, after a long, difficult illness, he passed away. His mother had him cremated, and, knowing his love for Disneyland, she took his ashes to the park and scattered them in the Mansion. She was not caught, of course, but, as a result of her scattering, her little boy is now condemned to haunt the park.

These stories are quite different from the legends I have analyzed previously. First, these stories are told from the perspective of the park guests: we get a great deal of background on both the deceased boy and his mother, and, if the park employees appear at all, they appear as antagonists, trying to stop the mother from completing her righteous quest. Second, the tone of these stories is, once again, radically different. Most of the ash scattering legends are, indeed, legends—that is, they are told as if they are true. However, most of the Boy in Red narratives are told with an element of *unreality*: “But you can never prove that,” as the cast member I quoted earlier said.

But the biggest difference I have noticed is the change in the apparent purpose of these tales. The general ash-scattering legends, as I described, appear to be primarily occupational folklore, expressing frustration at how park guests act. However, stories of the Boy in Red feel more like interdictionary tales, warning the hearers away from a course of action—in this case, scattering ashes. These stories draw on old traditions, which claim that improper burials raise vampires, ghosts, and other monsters

(cf. Barber 2010:13). In line with these traditions, the fact that this mother scattered her child's ashes in Disneyland, rather than giving him a more proper burial, leads to him becoming a ghost—and, furthermore, given the method of his burial, ensures that he will be confined to the Mansion for all of eternity.

Given these differences, it seems to me that these stories are folk reactions to the ash scattering legends. These stories begin with a sorrowful tale of a boy dying far too young, then a mother who pays tribute to her child in the only way she knows how—and, by doing so, these stories recognize the (probable) good intentions of the scatterers. However, the story quickly turns dark, warning scatterers that, despite their best intentions, going through with their plans will either (a) ruin their loved ones' afterlife by trapping them in the Mansion, or (b) ruin the park itself by causing it to be haunted. Given that, on the whole, potential scatterers are most likely hardcore Disney fans, both these reasons should be enough to at least give scatterers pause.

“A Ghost Will Follow You Home!”: Conclusion

As I have established, I believe these legends are spread, at least inside the park, as a reaction to the working conditions and corporate culture. Nevertheless, I feel that the fact that these legends persist *outside* the park is indicative of a greater shift in our perceptions of death and burial.

Several researchers have noted that our ideas about death and burial have shifted over time (e.g. Kselman 1993; Thomas, 2003). Graves from long ago tended to give little information about the deceased, sometimes even packing the dead, completely anonymous, into catacombs, ossuaries, or other mass graves. However, as time has marched on, burials have begun to individualize the dead more and more, including, in the past century or so, etchings on gravestones showing hobbies, interests, and even portraits of the deceased.

What I have found in my own research has both confirmed and expanded this idea. Judging from the Logan City Cemetery in Logan, Utah (which, admittedly, caters to an audience of more conservative tastes than most), gravestones have become more and more complex over the last fifty years or so, showing not only portraits, hobbies, and occupations, but also places of origin, statements of faith, family trees, and, in one memorable example, a number of snarky quotes to indicate the personality of the deceased. I also notice an increase in asymmetrical headstones, often shaped to look like unworked rocks, which stood out easily, even at a distance, against the reigning uniformity. Though earlier gravestones were often more elaborate (with carvings of surrogate mourners, cloth drapes, funeral wreaths, and so on), these more modern

examples *screamed* for attention, demanding that *these* dead in particular be recognized as unique individuals.

This same trend of individualization is easily observable with a quick flip through any mortuary catalog. In addition to the expected wide variety of materials and designs for both gravestones and caskets, one can also find a startling number of customization options, including personalized urns and embroidered “head panels” for caskets. These latter options can display religious images, statements of faith or love, and even (in the agricultural community of Logan, at least) professions of loyalty to a particular breed of cow or brand of tractor.

Such catalogs, along with Thomas and Kselman’s work, my cemetery research—and, of course, these legends about the Haunted Mansion—suggest that, currently, we expect that where and how we are buried should say something about who we were in life. That is, if we are a music enthusiast, we can realistically expect to be buried with sheet music to our favorite hymn carved on our headstone; on the other hand, if we are a Disney fan, we can expect (or at least desire) to be buried in the Happiest Place on Earth. Indeed, initial research suggests that this desire is more common than might be expected: an apparent fan, quoted in connection with the 2007 Pirates scattering, said “I’ve just heard people joke about it, how much they love Disneyland and that they’d like to be buried there, have their ashes scattered there. I’ve even said it” (Shoetz 2007).

Curiously, at least among theme parks, ash scatterings appear to be restricted exclusively to Disney parks. When I asked a representative from Knott’s Berry Farm, a theme park about 15 minutes away from Disneyland, they claimed that no one had asked to scatter there (Castro 2016). I asked the same question of Lagoon, a small Utah theme park with its own “Haunted House” dark ride, and got a response directly from the president of the park; he likewise confirmed that they had never received such a request, though he added that, if a guest were to be sneaky about it, there is little that the park would be able to do to stop them. “However, at this time,” he added, “our thought is that we let Disneyland have the exclusive as an ash scattering venue” (Freed 2015).

Though I have not been able to get this sort of direct response from other parks—several others did not respond to my emails—a series of quick google searches appears to confirm this theory. Searching for terms like “Ash Scatterings in Disneyland” immediately returns several pages of ash scattering legends and rumors, while the same is not true of searches like “Ash Scatterings in Six Flags Magic Mountain” or “Universal Studios Hollywood,” both located within two hours’ drive of Disneyland.

For both of these reasons, I posit that ash scatterings—and, of course, the spreading of ash scattering legends—is a rather morbid, but nonetheless legitimate, Disneyland fan activity. The desire to be scattered in a Disney park, as well as the act of scattering itself, is a commemoration of the life of a truly dedicated fan. Many who request to be cremated ask to have their ashes scattered at their homes, or perhaps on their native soil; that a fan would make a similar request of Disneyland is a profound measure of devotion. Additionally, the fact that the legends appear to have taken on a life of their own, far separated from the original incidents, may also reflect an element of jealousy, a secret, hidden desire to be buried at Disneyland oneself—or, at the very least, an acknowledgement that such behavior is becoming more acceptable.

However, we still have the stories of the Boy in Red, which appear to represent a backlash against such thinking. The horror and revulsion implied in these narratives naturally extends to the practice itself: that is, these stories see the scattering trend and urge fans to fight against it. Thus, though many fans may want to be buried at Disneyland, many others continue to be repulsed and horrified by the implications of such an act.

In any case, examining these legends has been fruitful. Doing so has given us a window into the rather insular community of Disneyland employees, and given us an idea of what it feels like to actually work there. By examining the account from the Haunted Mansion separately, we have also been able to uncover a hidden tension within the park, showing that employees are fiercely loyal to and protective of their own attraction. More importantly, we have seen that these stories may also have a greater meaning, expressing an unexpected avenue of fan activity. In short, by learning more about legends surrounding a very artificial, very fabricated haunted house, we have been able to learn more about the actual ghosts that still haunt us as a people.

Notes

¹ This quote, as well those used in the other headings in this chapter, has been taken from the ride itself. Quotes are drawn either from the narration of the “Ghost Host” that accompanies the ride, or from the lyrics of the ride’s theme song, “Grim Grinning Ghosts.”

² To avoid confusion between Disney, the company, and Disney, the man, I will refer to Walt Disney as “Walt” (a practice still followed in the park, where “Uncle Walt” is still invoked as the ultimate authority on in-park matters), and Walt Disney Studios as “Disney.”

³ To be clear: the façade is the public-facing building that guests use to enter the ride, i.e., the “house” part of the Haunted Mansion. The majority of the ride track is actually located in a nondescript warehouse just outside the earthen berm that marks the border of Disneyland; in fact, most of the early part of the ride, including the famous “Stretching Rooms,” are subtle ways of herding the guests towards to the ride track.

⁴ A tidbit of Mansion folklore—urban legends claim that the hearse was originally used to carry the body of an early Mormon leader, either Brigham Young (as most commonly

told) or Joseph Smith (as reported by Baham) (Baham 2004, 77). However, the associated Snopes.com article points out that the hearse was purchased at auction without any kind of documentation, and that the manufacturer's plate had been removed, making it impossible to track down its history with any degree of certainty. More importantly, Young's funeral, at the explicit instructions of Young himself, did not actually use a hearse (Mikkelson 2007a).

⁵ Other sources, including Snopes.com, claim this legend was used to explain the long wait between the completion of the ride's façade in 1963 and its official opening in 1969—that is, the heart attack and subsequent delay happened during an early preview, rather than shortly after opening (Mikkelson 2007b). Of course, these versions are not mutually exclusive—perhaps the legend morphed to reflect the circumstances of the later closure—but no source I have found mentions such a connection. In any case, these legends are granted additional credibility by the fact that Disney *has* had to redesign certain attractions due to safety concerns. One such attraction is Walt Disney World's "Mission: Space," which needed to be remodeled after a number of guests reported injuries including, notably, heart trouble (*Wikipedia* 2016).

⁶ Disney-speak for "Employee." Much of Disneyland's in-park terminology is appropriated from show business, especially the theater; compare the idea of the "Script," discussed in the section "Materializing the Disembodied," below.

⁷ Such pauses are not unusual on the Haunted Mansion: the ride cars are all part of a single continuous chain, so any kind of hold-up (for example, employees helping a disabled guest into or out of one of the cars) temporarily halts the entire ride. Of the past several times I have ridden the Mansion, easily 75% of them have featured a pause, often quite a lengthy one. Given the commonality of such stops, it is unlikely that the scatterer—much less the other guests—would see anything out of the ordinary with such a delay.

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