Ghosts, Goblins, Virgins, and Other Supernatural Creatures: Ghost Stories at Texas Tech University and South Plains College

by Mike Felker
We’re all familiar with those things that go bump in the night. Even my own fairly intelligent, usually level-headed wife refuses to go to sleep unless the closet doors are firmly closed. It was, however, her curious insistence on carrying all her textbooks to each exam that originally prompted me in 1986 and 1987 to survey my undergraduates at Texas Tech University about their own good-luck rituals. Of the over two-hundred responses I collected in one semester, the largest single category, by far, was “Luck on Exams and other Schoolwork,” a not-unexpected finding. The dozens of good luck rituals included everything from wearing lucky hats, dresses, sweatshirts, or shoes, to “my nicest underwear because old underwear makes me feel inferior.”

Because the survey was open-ended and anonymous—“What superstitions have you heard about school?”—I also got a number of responses which didn’t fit into the categories about college life. Many of these responses dealt, instead, with stories of ghosts and the supernatural on the college campus. When I remembered the undergraduate in a Renaissance class who had written that Shakespeare’s contemporaries believed in “ghosts, goblins, virgins, and other supernatural creatures,” I had my new categories neatly laid out for me. In some cases, I was even able to trace the origin of the stories I had collected. After I moved to South Plains College in Levelland in 1988, I discovered that my students there also had ghost stories that they wanted to tell. There, as at Tech, the students seemed strangely insistent upon explaining that they didn’t believe such stories themselves. Most didn’t even sign their names to the questionnaire, although those who did are given credit here.

While I was at Tech, I collected several good ghost stories, including multiple reports of the ghost of a lady’s head, or “a headless girl” on the sixth floor of Coleman Hall, which is a men’s
dorm: “It was seen floating underneath a desk in the room. During the summer, cheerleaders staying in Coleman for camp reported it, and a guy living there last year took a picture of it.” (unsigned)

For some reason, the dormitories seem especially susceptible to such ghosts; I received a report from Adrianna White of a girl raped and killed on the second floor of Knapp Hall, and another student reported a girl murdered in Gates Hall: “When I lived in Gates we used to never go to the bathroom alone at night due to a story of a girl murdered there two years earlier. Girls say they often heard her crying” (unsigned).

Another young woman wrote, “In my dormitory, the room three doors down, it is believed there is something uncomfortable about the room. A friend of mine lives there and says that she and her roommate, as well as the two girls who lived in the same room last year, have not been able to sleep easily in the room. My friend says that there is something uneasy about the room and it sometimes has strange noises” (Cathy Wald).

One student had heard a story about ghosts in West Hall, a former dormitory which now houses Admissions and other offices, and this writer even identified the source of the story he had heard, “The Secretary at the Ag Ed Building told me a story about West Hall. She said that way back when, the top floor was closed up. There was [sic] ghosts living up there. She said at all hours of the night lights would come on and go off. She said that she went up there and peeked through the crack of the boarded up door and saw footsteps [sic] in the dust.” (unsigned)

Of course, the dormitories don’t have a monopoly on ghosts; other campus buildings are haunted, also. In the Administration Building, “a ghost rings the victory bell after each ballgame” (Patty Owens). In the Biology Building, one student wrote, “I heard there was a teenager a few years back that was playing on the elevator and climbed out of the trap door and somehow lost his footing and fell and was killed. So the superstition that goes along with this incident is that this boy haunts the Biology Building” (unsigned). This story might actually be a modification of a real event. Shortly
after the new Biology Building was opened, a student did fall to his death there, but he committed suicide by jumping from the roof of the building; he didn’t fall from the elevator.

Perhaps the ghosts reported at the Texas Tech Museum should be the least surprising; after all, Tech did move old ranch houses from all over the state to its Ranching Heritage Center. One student had heard “Some of the former inhabitants of the Barton House at the Ranching Heritage Center come to visit on certain days of the year; these ghosts are apparently not hostile but rather curious” (unsigned).

Even the air-conditioning and maintenance tunnels underneath the campus have their share of ghosts: “Ghosts run around in the tunnels under the campus” (Patty Owens); and, “a girl was raped in the tunnels and her screams can still be heard” (Jenny Britton). In addition, the tunnels are said to be inhabited by one very specific ghost—the ghost of “a campus cleaning woman who
was stabbed in the tunnels by a guy stealing a test” (Adrianna White). The actual murder upon which this is based took place many years ago when a student did murder a cleaning lady who caught him trying to steal a test in the old Biology Building, not in the tunnels. And, of course, the cleaning woman’s ghost, or usually her ghostly head, has also been reported in the old Biology Building, usually floating in front of one of the windows.

South Plains College (S.P.C.) has fewer ghost stories, possibly because the school is younger than Texas Tech and possibly because, as a two-year institution, students don’t stay long enough for the stories to become part of their heritage. I did find a couple of students who had heard of a ghost that is seen at Brashear Lake (a small playa lake right next to the track). One student wrote, “I heard that a girl drowned in that little lake over here by S.P.C. She comes out on Halloween. I heard at night the spirit walks around and scares kids.” A second reported, “It comes out mostly when it rains real hard.” A former S.P.C. English instructor remembers well the drowning upon which this story is apparently based; Scott Yarbrough reported that a teenager drowned in the lake when Yarbrough was about eight, which would have been in the early 1970s. Levelland had had about a week of heavy rain and the boy and his brother had gone swimming on the first sunny day; he apparently got his feet tangled in the underbrush and drowned. Yarbrough said he remembered the grappling hooks going in and out of the lake all day. It took hours, almost the rest of the day, to find the body and, by the time they dragged the boy from the lake, several hundred people had gathered around the edges. The body was very white, pallid, and cold-looking. The next day at school, the rumor was that because the boy had been trapped that long underwater, his soul had been forced out of his body, and that the ghost still roamed the lake at night looking for his body.

Two unnamed sisters taking my class reported independently of each other the same story about their haunted apartment. The first sister wrote, “We have a very busy ghost by the name of Poindexter in our apartment because he frequently opens the
The second reported, “Sometimes our apartment door opens on its own. My roommates and I think it could be a ghost by the name of Poindexter.” When I asked how they knew the ghost’s name was Poindexter, both were overcome with such a fit of the giggles that they couldn’t answer. I still don’t know how they knew the ghost’s name.

Although two faculty members told me that the South Plains Theatre Building has a ghost, as all good theatres should, the Drama teacher at that time denied she had ever heard anything about such a story.

Although I collected superstitions about monsters in almost every building on the Tech campus, the students were far more fascinated by the world beneath those buildings—those spooky air-conditioning tunnels. In addition to being told that the tunnels are used to store nuclear weapons and Star Wars weaponry, I learned that, “A student once entered the tunnels looking for a way either into the girls’ dorm or into a locked building to try to steal a test,
and was never seen again” (unsigned). The tunnels are also said to be inhabited by monsters (non-specific), by a rapist who uses the tunnels to get into the girls’ dorms and then make his escape, by a “looney,” and by an “insane murderer years ago who would kill only girls and who cut off their heads; he used the tunnels to get around at night. These murders went on for months and if you were out after curfew, a police officer would pick you up and escort you home. Supposedly, these murders are the reason they put up the emergency phones.” The young man added, “this story never
worried me too much because I haven’t heard of any murders in the past few years” (Michael Koett).

These tunnels are also inhabited by one very specific monster which emerges from the tunnels to “steal our clothes from the washers and dryers in the basement of Wells Hall. There is always something missing” (unsigned).

And I hesitate to call him a goblin or monster, but I also received multiple unsigned reports of “the guy who lives in the stacks of the library.” This, I suspect, is probably just based on sightings of a doctoral candidate trying to satisfy his dissertation committee, but one girl added, “Several years ago he raped girls” (Adrianna White).

The campus at South Plains is much quieter, I’m sorry to say; I received only one report of goblins or monsters there: “I’ve heard that there are closet monsters in the dorm closets, so when you go to bed at night or you are alone in your room, keep the closet doors closed” (unsigned). My wife reminds me that these monsters are not college-specific: everyone knows that bad things live in the closet and good things under the bed, unless, of course, whatever is under the bed is drooling.

At Tech, as at many other schools, virgins are often attributed supernatural powers of their own. The most common stories relate to Tech’s statue of Will Rogers sitting on his favorite horse, Soap-suds. The story goes that if a virgin ever graduates, Will Rogers will do one of the following:

• get off his horse and walk around Memorial Circle
• ride his horse around Memorial Circle (Texas Tech Professor Emeritus Kenneth Davis told me that several years ago, the Tech paper had a picture of hoof prints in the snow making a circuit of Memorial Circle; this was, however, never verified)
• get off and walk around his horse
• fall off his horse
• stand up in the saddle
• come alive and ride off into the sunset
• get off his horse and walk across the street (Adrianna White)
• climb down off of his horse (Jeffrey Otey)
• step off the pedestal with his horse (Angie Conde)

There were several other responses in the same vein, but with a twist: “If Will Rogers escorts a girl off campus, she’s a virgin” (Debbie Byrd); “The day a virgin graduates, Roy Rogers will get off his horse” (Robert E. Parker); “If a virgin comes to Tech [this one doesn’t even have to graduate], Will Rogers will dismount from his horse” (Patty Owens); and, “Will Rogers gets off his horse once a year for a virgin sacrifice” (unsigned). Now we know why so few of them graduate! Another student had heard that the Tech mascot, the Masked Rider “can never ride at football games again if a virgin graduates” (Britton).

I have heard similar stories about several other college campuses, involving the statue of a buffalo at West Texas State, and the statue of a bear at a school in Colorado. Unfortunately, I found no such stories on the South Plains campus. Whether this means that virgins do sometimes manage to get an Associate’s Degree or, perhaps more likely, simply reflects the fact that we don’t have a statue on campus, yet remains to be determined.

ENDNOTES

1. In 1986, I asked my Texas Tech students to write a daily journal entry on any college superstitions about which they had heard or in which they participated. Because the results produced so much more than luck rituals, I refined the question for 1987: “As part of a survey of superstitions at Tech, please list any and all superstitions which you personally believe, or have heard about, which pertain to college life in general or Texas Tech in particular. You may include things people do for good luck or to avoid bad luck, things people do in hope of scoring better on exams (wear the same clothes, carry a ‘lucky’ ball-point pen), or rumors you have heard about ‘mysterious’ occurrences, serious or not, on campus (the statue of Will Rogers, the tunnels beneath the campus, the behavior of certain professors).
Please restrict your list to superstitions that people really believe or to those which, even if not taken seriously, are particularly widespread.”

2. In 1988, I used the following prompt at South Plains College: “We’ve all known or heard of students who wear the same lucky shirt to all tests, or the same lucky tennis shoes to all basketball games. Perhaps you’ve also heard other superstitions that relate to college life or to South Plains College (a haunted dorm room, etc.). Please take a few minutes to write down all the superstitions you’ve heard of about school in general or about South Plains College specifically.”