

# The Telephone Game

By

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Remember that game you played as a child? Each successive participant secretly whispers to the next a phrase or sentence whispered to them by the preceding participant. Cumulative errors from mishearing often result in the sentence heard by the last player differing greatly and amusingly from the one uttered by the first. It is most often played by children as party game and is often invoked as a metaphor for cumulative error. Especially the inaccuracies of rumors In British English, "Chinese whispers" refers to a process where a story, usually gossip, is passed on from one person to another and in the process the story gets distorted. The Guinness Book of World Records lists the first whisper in the current record-holding "telephone game" as "They inherited the earth and then the army came and scorched it." The final words passed on were "Mayfield College." Quite a difference in meaning, wouldn't you say?

This game we played as children and even experimented with later in life in college psychology and sociology courses is meant to be a metaphor of how word of mouth communication can lose much of the original meaning or facts after it is passed through several filters i.e.- each person hearing and relating the information. This type of communication has caused a plethora of problems over the years from individual relationships to historical accounts. A person's reputation can be destroyed either intentionally or unintentionally through this process. The same can be said of experiences and historical accounts. How many stories have we grown up believing as fact as a result? The two most prominent that come to mind are from our own Americana. The legends of George Washington cutting down his father's cherry tree or John Henry's amazing feats as a railroad worker probably had some basis in fact but the stories, having been

passed down over the years, probably took on a different look and turned from historical fact to historical legend. Most legends we are familiar with probably have a certain degree of basis in fact but through years or centuries of word of mouth relating of the stories, or years or centuries of the “telephone game”; the original details or facts have been lost. This breakdown and reimagining of information is not limited to word of mouth accounts but can also occur in our own neurological processes. This information breakdown in both cases can be caused by a number of factors that include poor listening, poor communication, a desire to change or manipulate facts with the intent of harm to another or to satisfy an individual's own self esteem issues, poor memory organization and poor documentation.

The problems associated with the “telephone game” are just as prevalent, if not more so as anywhere else, in the field of paranormal research. How many ghostly legends have you heard growing up? Right here, in my home state of Arkansas, the legends are as abundant as anyplace. One particular legend that comes to mind is that of the Gurdon Light. The Gurdon Light is a “ghostly” phenomenon that occurs on the railroad tracks just outside the sleepy town of Gurdon, AR. Mysterious lights appear on a nightly basis along this stretch of tracks that runs through the town. The lights appear to move and change position at different intervals. The legend that has evolved from this phenomenon is that a train conductor was decapitated in a railroad accident in the 1920's and the mysterious light is his lantern as he moves up and down the tracks searching for his severed head. This legend probably sounds familiar to a lot of folks that live in areas where this phenomenon occurs.

This phenomenon has been pretty much debunked when you look at the geology of the area. First, as you know, steel that railroad rails are built from is a natural conductor of electricity. The whole state of Arkansas and particularly the Gurdon area, sits on very high deposits of quartz. Quartz has a property known as piezoelectric. Piezoelectricity is the ability of some materials (notably crystals and certain ceramics) to generate an electric potential in response to applied mechanical stress. This may take the form of a separation of electric charge across the crystal lattice. If the material is not short-circuited, the applied charge induces a voltage across the material. In combination with the quartz and the railroad ties, the second largest fault line in North America runs through Arkansas. The New Madrid Fault, which caused the largest known earthquake in North America in 1811, is extremely active and is constantly producing micro tremors. Though

these micro tremors are not felt on the surface they produce constant stress on the quartz beds. This stress can cause an electrical charge, through mechanical stress, that travels upward through the ground and then runs along the train rails. When the charge reaches a break in the rail, it goes into the air and appears as a mysterious spectral light.

Ok, for those of you that know me, you know I can't resist throwing some technical jargon into one of my articles. But before I lose you and get too far off track, let's get focused again. The "telephone game" is important here for one big reason. Even though there is solid scientific evidence to provide a prosaic explanation for this phenomenon, there are many that continue to propagate this story as paranormal for their own motivations. Recently I heard a radio interview with another less reputable local paranormal group who claimed to have a photo of this phantom conductor. I have yet to see this photo anywhere. There was also a recent television show about scary places in the United States that made the Gurdon Light the focus of one of their episodes. This is yet another example of taking information and twisting it or modifying it to fit one's own motivations. While a good percentage of information inaccuracy is intentional, such as the example cited above, there is also a fair amount of information degradation that occurs innocently.

Human memory can sometimes be spotty at best. It is difficult to remember what you had for dinner last week let alone remember the details of something that happened months or years ago. Memory is usually divided into two categories – short term and long term. Short-term memory allows recall for a period of several seconds to a minute without rehearsal. Its capacity is also very limited. George A. Miller, when working at Bell Laboratories in 1956, conducted experiments showing that the store of short term memory was  $7 \pm 2$  items (the title of his famous paper, "The magical number  $7 \pm 2$ "). Modern estimates of the capacity of short-term memory are lower, typically on the order of 4-5 items, and we know that memory capacity can be increased through a process called chunking. Chunking refers to a strategy for making more efficient use of short-term memory by recoding information. More generally, Herbert Simon has used the term chunk to indicate long-term memory structures that can be used as units of perception and meaning, and chunking as the learning mechanisms leading to the acquisition

of these chunks. Chunking means to organize items into familiar manageable units.

The storage in sensory memory and short-term memory generally has a strictly limited capacity and duration, which means that information is available for a certain period of time, but is not retained indefinitely. By contrast, long-term memory can store much larger quantities of information for potentially unlimited duration (sometimes a whole life span). The capacity can also approach infinity (unlimited). For example, given a random seven-digit number, we may remember it for only a few seconds before forgetting, suggesting it was stored in our short-term memory. On the other hand, we can remember telephone numbers for many years through repetition; this information is said to be stored in long-term memory. While short-term memory encodes information acoustically, long-term memory encodes it semantically. In a sense, the “telephone game” is played in our own long term memory. The longer we consider information in our own heads, the more likely it is to become consolidated and revised by other memory fragments. Think of the times you have been to a city, park or building and then not returned for a while. When you finally return, even though nothing has changed, it is not exactly like the mental image you had stored in your head about the location. This can be even more pronounced with your personal recollection of an experience. While your visit to a building, city, etc. probably had a prolonged duration of hours or days, a personal experience may have lasted only a few seconds. There was a long period of time in between visits so the factor of repetition in encoding long term memory is removed. After a period of time of mental compartmentalization, or your mental “telephone game”; the memory can become tainted enough that much of the original details are lost. This works much like the “telephone game” because while the experience is stored in your long term memory, you occasionally recall and recollect the memory. Other thoughts, considerations or experiences you have had since the event gradually filter in and distort the accuracy of the memory.

In paranormal research, we are frequently contacted by homeowners with claims of paranormal activity. Usually by the time it reached our case manager it has already been recounted to friends and family a number of times. It has also been

mentally relived several times as mentioned in the paragraph above. A book or a lamp that allegedly had been thrown across the room may in actuality have just fallen off a shelf or table. The emotional aspect that enters into an individual's recall almost dictates that the story be a little more embellished each time. Not for the purpose of intentional deception but to avoid sounding foolish about their claims. I am sure you have heard the old expression that if you repeat something long enough, you inaugurate it in your mind to be true. This trend is no different for paranormal researchers when it comes to the recollection of a personal experience. The emotional aspect comes into play with their remembrance as well. I have had personal experiences on investigations and some unexplained experiences outside of paranormal research. But how can I keep myself honest and not turn my own experiences into my personal, mental "telephone game"?

The best antidote for this version of the "telephone game" is to remember this motto- "If it isn't documented, it didn't happen". This is a philosophy that every paranormal researcher should adapt to avoid information degradation. If something is experienced that you believe to be potentially paranormal, an immediate and accurate documentation should be made of the experience. You may have a different recollection of the experience two weeks from now, but if it was thoroughly documented there is an accurate and permanent record of the event. This philosophy is one that should be encouraged with clients as well. Once a client makes contact requesting an investigation, one thing that should be requested of them is they keep an accurate and detailed log of the phenomenon that occurs from that time until the time of the actual investigation. This not only gives the homeowner some perspective on their claims but will also give the researchers a starting place when the investigation is conducted. Historical research is also paramount when it comes to investigating a legend or any other claims of activity. The original documentation is likely to be the most accurate.

The "telephone game", whether by word of mouth or mentally; is a phenomenon that can cause irreparable damage not only to an individual's reputation but to an individual's recollection. Documentation and fact finding are the best antidotes to avoid this dangerous game. The best rule to follow in research is if you are not sure; don't report it as fact and document, document, document.

