



SGHA Articles

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Articles ~ Ghost hunting and beyond ~ The evolution of ghosts, building myths

A few guidelines help in tracing and analyzing ghost stories. The oldest locates ghost stories among the major forms of folk narrative: myth, legend, folktale. A second sets up two categories: tales of the supernatural composed and transmitted orally and those written for print and publication. A third depends on determining authorial intention: a work using the dead and intended to frighten the reader or audience is a ghost story.

Ghost stories have their closest association with folk narrative form and, appropriately, may best be considered "supernatural legends." Some ghost stories are little more than memorials — "narratives of a personal happening" of a single individual. Others live on beyond a single teller to be told and retold by a community of tellers over generations. Ghost stories, unlike myths, ignore the cosmic questions, the inclusive explanations, and the execution of great tasks; instead they concentrate on one or several ghosts, a "returner" from the grave, who returns to set right an old wrong, doomed to haunt an area or even as a protector.

Manmade buildings, if they're big enough, and especially if they're old enough that they're foreign to the current society, are natural homes for myths. It's the older Victorian houses which tend to attract haunted house stories, because we don't build them like that any more. Castles are even bigger attractors for myths of all types, most frequently ghost stories.

Most myths are based on events.

Birthplaces: Where a historical figure or famous person was born.

Deathplaces: Where a historical figure died. Surprisingly uncommon, because so many mythic heroes instead fade away.

Burial Grounds: Where a historical figure is said to be buried.

Battlefields: The locations of infamous battles, often so great that they've left scars upon the landscape.

Places of Magical Events: As I've already noted, many places throughout Europe are said to be the homes to miracles. Other cultures might have local settings whose myths center around magical events.

Places of Romantic Events: Romances always get good play in mythology. Particular Romantic settings might be where a couple met, where they kissed, where they had sex, or where their love was tragically destroyed (or they were).

Places of Tragic Events: Death, destruction, and hopelessness, like battles, will be commemorated and may leave their marks upon the landscapes.

The evolution of a ghost

Sometimes the human tenancy to build myths embellishes a haunted location, distorting the facts in the process. For a ghost hunter this becomes a problem because a great deal of the reported phenomena, or how that phenomena is perceived, is built off of the local myth.

A typical example is the Jerome Grand Hotel. According to the myth, Claude M. Harvey was in the elevator shaft working on the machinery in the 1930s. The story has it that while he was in there, a nurse took the elevator down to the first floor and crushed his skull. The coroner's report was hastily done, with no real autopsy performed, and a verdict of 'accident' was handed down. This was suspicious, because of the speed with which the investigation was performed. They completely overlooked the fact that the safety interlocks had to have been bypassed for the lift to come down and crush the man's skull. The company just wanted to sweep it under the rug and be done with it. The ghost of "Harvey" now supposedly haunts the hotel.

Several problems with this whole conspiracy/murder theory when the situation is studied thoroughly.

1: The elevator is *sloooooooow*. You'd have to be a deaf paraplegic to A: not hear it, and B: not be able to get out of the way in time. Or even just shout up the shaft to let someone know you are in it. At that

point it is a simple matter to stop the elevator in motion. Just open the bloody door a crack, it will stop wherever it happens to be, even between floors.

2: A building maintenance worker DID die, this is true. However, when his body was found in the bottom of the shaft, the only visible sign of any injury was blood seeping out of his nose and ears. His head and everything else was perfectly intact. This is consistent with a massive stroke/hemorrhage. He suffered from his stroke and fell to the bottom of the shaft, between the big springs which would have kept the elevator from crushing him anyway.

3: There's a *ton* of space on the bottom of the shaft. A full grown adult can *easily* simply crouch down and wait for the elevator to stop moving. No crushy skull.

4: A person would have to be about 7 feet tall to get his skull crushed between the bottom of the elevator and the maintenance room floor landing as the lift came down. Otherwise, it'd simply force a man to his knees, if he were standing on the bottom of the shaft. Unless he was REALLY obstinate, then I suppose if he locked his knees it could theoretically break his neck. Still no crushy skull.

5: A man standing next to the lift machinery on the maintenance floor would have to be knocked to the floor with his head in the shaft to cause a head injury. However, this would decapitate. No crushy skull.

6: NO readings found anywhere in the elevator. No odd noises, no cold spots, nada. The workers themselves at the front desk have *never* heard or 'felt' anything in it either.

It does not make sense. It makes a nice ghost/murder story, but it doesn't add up with the known facts. The Grand is haunted enough without needing to come up with even more stories. However the Harvey's ghost is still being searched for today by ghost hunters. The harvey story was started and spread by the television show "Unsolved Mysteries" which aired a segment on the hotel. Even the locals and hotel employees agree that the story was exaggerated and embellished to make the ghost story even more dramatic.

Unfortunately this problem of embellishing is not limited to just the Jerome Grand. Anytime a "haunting" is written about or broadcast on a television show, the myth building begins, making the job of a paranormal researcher much more difficult.

This is a very important factor. If ghost hunters build their data off a certain event or person and later those things are shown to be false, it can discredit many elements of the investigation itself.