"And They Never Did Find Him": Dialogues of History, Geography, and Fear in Adolescent Legend-Tripping

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“And They Never Did Find Him”: Dialogues of History, Geography, and Fear in Adolescent Legend-Tripping

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in American Studies from The College of William & Mary

by

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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April 18, 2012
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Preface

When I was a fourteen-year-old adolescent growing up in Staten Island, the most suburban and often forgotten of the five boroughs of New York City, a friend of mine recounted the story of an abandoned building just down the street from our school’s campus. The St. Augustinian Academy, more commonly referred to as simply ‘The Monastery’, presently sits deserted on the property of Wagner College in the Grymes Hill area of Staten Island. The old brick building with clay shingles choked by unkempt forest and dead branches exists in stark contrast to the rest of the manicured campus grounds and the surrounding neighborhood with its uniform houses and perfect suburban landscaping.

The story my friend told was about a group of monks who lived in the monastery in complete silence. One of the monks went insane during his time there and went on a killing spree, murdering the other monks and dragging their bodies down to the lowest basement sublevel one by one. It is unknown how many sublevels are actually in the basement, but if one wished to encounter the ghosts of the massacred monks, they must descend all the way to the bottom. My friend told me that no one has actually made it to the bottom level; they always give up out of fear for the further down they go, the less evidence there is of previous explorers having been there. The rest of the building is covered in graffiti and satanic markings, and it is supposedly common to find mutilated animals in the rooms and on the staircases leading down to the basements.

I use the word ‘supposedly,’ because I never had the nerve to explore the monastery myself. I was not the bravest of adolescents and while I would stare into the
woods whenever I passed by on the way home from school, distracted by the disturbing images in my mind of what I heard happened there, I never attempted to find out for myself. I never tried to transgress any physical boundaries by exploring the building or any mental boundaries created by the fear of getting caught trespassing. Which is not to say I was not transfixed by the macabre possibilities of such a place. I consumed any information I could find on haunted places in my area, usually on the Internet. It was on sites like *Weird U.S.* that I came across personal accounts by people claiming to have visited sites in the New York/Staten Island area, including the Monastery. One such account that is still available on the site is from “Dale N,” who describes a rather disturbing find:

> The underground hallways are a maze that travels God only knows how low beneath the surface. On one trip investigating a flooded seventh level below the surface, we found a giant stone in the middle of a room where the ceiling was not at all caved in and neither were the walls. In the same room we found candles and something that made the hairs stand on the back of my neck; marks on one of the ancient wooden doors as if it were locked from the outside and someone had tried to claw their way out of the room.¹

The experience that the person above describes is known as *legend-tripping,* an act of exploration fueled by the knowledge of a legend or tale associated with a certain place. Explorers typically invest some belief in the legend, at least for the duration of the trip itself, as a means of achieving a temporary transformative feeling, usually of fright. In this

way, they not only transgress an invisible boundary between the ‘real’ and the supernatural. They also come out of the trip with a new or different understanding of their physical environment and perpetuate the legend themselves through recounting their experience to others.

Many similarities can be found among the tales that become associated with legend-tripping sites. They commonly center around buildings or monuments that are considered physically strange or mysterious, or that have explicit connections with the dead (graveyards or gravestones for instance), or are sights of violent crimes. The stories themselves typically involve death as a result of murder, suicide, war, or disease. These commonalities allow the tales to be easily accessible and easily translated to a wide array of people in different areas. However, storytellers also rely heavily on local events and history in order to give the stories more validity in the minds of the audience and thus pique their curiosity. This is what gives legend-tripping the power to shape local or regional history, the texture of the physical environment, and a person’s relationship to both. It is also a reason why studying legend-tripping is important, for such stories have part of my own self-definition as an American citizen, a Staten Islander, and later as a resident of Virginia. As a child, it was through these supernatural and sometimes grizzly tales that I first began to understand that there are histories that would go unrecorded and forgotten if it was not for the power of myth and mythmakers, that spaces themselves can be contested and have multiple histories and multiple meanings, and most simply and most importantly, that not everything is as it seems.

Introduction
For this paper, I drew heavily upon the work of folklorists, some who addressed gothic legends and scary stories and some who did not, in order to develop a framework through which to examine modern folklore and urban legends. Before I began my research, I did not have a detailed understanding of how legends grow and circulate, so reading the work of Patrick B. Mullen and Linda Dégh was very helpful. Their work explores how historical and social events can trigger the rumors that eventually grow into legends, and how dialogue between legend-teller and listener facilitates this growth. In addition, I referred to writings on the relationship between folklore and regionalism, specifically those of Kent C. Ryden, to demonstrate how intrinsic landscape and local history and culture are to the development of tales.

A few anthropologists and folklorists have written on the specific subject of legend-tripping, but the research I have found on broader topics has made up the backbone of this paper. Dégh and Bill Ellis have both written extensively on the theory of ostension, the various ways people participate in legend development through performance and ritual. Ellis focuses on ostension in relation to typical legend-tripping activities, such as graffiti or mock rituals, in order to debunk rumors common among rural and suburban residents in the 1970s through 1990s that large networks of Satanic

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cults were initiating adolescent youths. In addition to more theoretical texts, I also rely heavily on the legend-tripping stories recounted in personal interviews and correspondence, accounts published on Internet websites and forums, and on some personal experience.

In the first chapter, I use Mark Twain’s novel *The Legend of Tom Sawyer* as an example of legend-tripping in literature, as well as a popular cultural reference point through which I can introduce legend-tripping and how it functions. I examine the scenes in the novel that I believe depict what we now refer to as legend-tripping, specifically the scenes in which Tom and Huck explore a haunted house looking for buried treasure and their adventures in McDougal’s Cave. I also look at the character of Injun Joe as an example of a literary villain who transforms into the classic legend-tripping spectre, a mysterious racialized ‘other’ who appears to threaten the boys more in his death than in his life. Then, I relate the novel to the author’s own adolescent legend-trips in the cave that directly informed his descriptions of McDougal’s Cave. This background information on Twain’s youth shows how a ‘real-life local legend’ influenced the author and maintained enough power within his own memories to shape significant scenes in his work.

The second chapter provides a background on folklore and legend development, and addresses questions regarding authorship and audience reception of modern legends. It traces how legends grow, gain legitimacy, and eventually become part of social and

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cultural knowledge. I then shift my focus to urban legends and camp legends: scary stories that circulate among a concentrated group of people (such as campers and camp counselors) but conform to a generic horror legend structure that makes them transmutable and thus enduring. Lastly, I introduce the concept of legends being in constant dialogue with geography and the cognitive spatial maps that individuals develop when they encounter parts of their physical environment in connection to myth.

In the third chapter, I define legend-tripping and ostension and explain how legend-trippers perform legends by making visitations to sites and attempting to encounter spirits through ritual activities. I also define the different types, or rather degrees, of ostension, pseudo-ostension, and quasi-ostension to show the wide spectrum of performance involved in legend-tripping. This subsequently relates to how outsiders, especially adults and authority figures perceive adolescent excursions to haunted places and commonly mistake them for more deviant behavior. I position legend-tripping as an activity that has the potential to be disturbing and somewhat violent (such as in the case of animal mutilation), but is usually means for adolescent growth and socialization. Along the way, I explore the physical characteristics of legend-tripping sites that have been the focus of other folklorists’ research, in an attempt to once again highlight the relationship between legends and geography. I conclude with a consideration of why adolescents are drawn to such dark stories and histories and how facing the threat of death in a space that is usually non-threatenining is actually an important part of growing up.

The fourth chapter presents case studies of two popular legend-tripping sites. The first is Willowbrook State School and Sea View Hospital in Staten Island, New York. The
second is the Bunny Man Bridge in Clifton, Virginia. I trace the history of each location and the legends that grew from events that may or may not have occurred there using folklore theories and concepts introduced earlier in the paper. I also include portions of interviews with people who have visited the sites in their teenage years to provide insight into how such pilgrimages affected them.

The fifth and final chapter examines how the media is shaping contemporary legend-tripping. I consider the independent faux-documentary film *The Blair Witch Project* a significant turning point in public awareness of legend-tripping and similar activities, including “ghost hunting”. Audiences’ initial responses to the film ranged from letters to the producers inquiring about the movie’s authenticity to organizing their own film crews and search parties in order to experience fright themselves and possibly find the ‘missing’ cast members. The impact of the Internet on the film’s marketing campaign reflects the importance of online culture and communication to modern-day legend-tripping. Thus the second half of the chapter is dedicated to the role of the Internet in legend dissemination, in popularizing the term beyond folklore scholarship, and in preserving people’s interest in legend-tripping beyond adolescence.

Ultimately, I intend to open up a new dimension to the already vibrant conversations surrounding legend-tripping. This new dimension focuses more on the complex interactions of the personal, historical, and spatial within individuals who embark on such pilgrimages, and not simply on examining adolescent leisure and delinquency. While elements of socialization and teenage experimentation are certainly present in legend-tripping activities, the local lore that a person learns and passes on is an
important influence on cognitive conception of space and geography, relationship to local
history, and one’s coming-of-age experience. Most importantly, legend-tripping helps
youths develop an introductory or working understanding of competing histories within
contested spaces, and forces them to confront such power dynamics through storytelling
and exploration.
Chapter 1 – Literary Legend-Tripping

“Who’s ready for the cave?”

- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (page 198)

The adolescent practice that we have come to call “legend-tripping” did not originate in the United States. People participate in similar trips all over the world. Whether it is the search for ghosts or spirits at haunted sites or pilgrimages to sites that are deemed holy or said to have healing powers, people visit such locations with expectations of a temporary or permanent transformative experience. The legend-tripper or visitor enters into a dialogue with the place they visit by performing a ritual or a prayer or by reciting a story. They are active participants in the legend itself. The visitor transforms the venue into something special or supernatural through his or her performance and thus transforms themselves, either temporarily or permanently.

Determining the origin of legend-tripping in the United States is basically impossible. Anthropologists and folklorists only began to recognize legend-tripping as we know it today in the 1960s. However, we can see evidence of practices similar to legend-tripping as early as 1876 in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. This text offers a literary framework for understanding legend-tripping and how it operates. The novel contains two scenes that capture the rebellious, thrill-seeking spirit of adolescent legend-tripping: the first occurs when Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn hunt for buried treasure in a haunted house, and the second is the group expedition through McDougal’s cave.
Furthermore, the mysterious character of Injun Joe, whom the children encounter on both of their journeys, personifies the potentially threatening presence that adolescents dare (and possibly secretly hope) to confront on legend-trips.

When the boys explore the haunted house in search of treasure, Twain vividly describes a classic legend-tripping scenario, full of adolescent wonder and fear. He writes, “When they reached the haunted house, there was something so weird and grisly about the dead silence that reigned there under the baking sun, and something so depressing about the loneliness and desolation of the place that they were afraid, for a moment to venture in.”  

However, the triumph over their fear marks a surprising turn for the boys who, once they become more familiar with their environment, “gave the place a critical and interested examination, rather admiring their own boldness, and wondering at it, too.” The boys inhabit a place that is simultaneously exciting and dangerous, especially once Injun Joe becomes involved. Thus they also inhabit a space where childhood adventure and naiveté merges with impending adulthood and the subsequent knowledge that there are actual threats in the world.

They may not be able to see them or name them, but through legend-tripping the children encounter the power struggles between childhood and adulthood, innocence and maturity, that shape their lives. In his book about Mark Twain, literature and cultural studies scholar Richard Lowry examines how these two scenes function within the lives of the children. Lowry suggests, “Boys enact an Odyssean exploration of those spaces


6 Ibid.
designated deviant and criminal, even as the trial and subsequent cleansing ... seal legitimate boyhood in its asylum. Such wanderings cannot map such a world – it remains too supernatural, too fantastic, too unknowable. Rather, they map the limits of the legitimate, the power beneath the benevolence that produced these boundaries.”

Therefore, while the ‘mapping’ of their physical environment is not fully formed, the children do gain a deeper, but most likely unconscious, understanding of the dynamics of power, otherness, and fear. Such dynamics most noticeably reveal themselves in the relationship between the children and Injun Joe.

The villainous Injun Joe is simultaneously a two-dimensional character and the personification of more complicated feelings and fears. In his book Injun Joe’s Ghost, Harry J. Brown proposes that Joe’s mixed-race immediately marks him as an other, tainted from birth and simply performing the role he was destined to play: a terror and confusion to dominant white society. According to Lowry, Injun Joe “at once represents the comic apogee of the narrative’s complicit fantasy, and yet he who threatens the idyll of boyhood and exposes both the hypocrisy of the narrator’s nostalgia and that of adults who indulge in fantasies of safe amusement.” His racial otherness automatically makes him more mysterious in the eyes of both children and adults, so Tom Sawyer and his friends view him as a supernatural being even before his death: “In death Joe’s threat is even more pervasive; in his absence his presence is more persistent. When Tom, at the conclusion of

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9 Lowry, Littery Man, 102.
the novel, leads Huck through a secret passage to the long-sought treasure, the boys hesitate to grab the prize, still fearful that Joe might appear.”  

In death, Injun Joe transforms into an ideal incorporeal threat for legend-trippers, a spirit that lingers in their lives and their fears. This lingering feeling is something we can imagine Twain experienced himself, for the scenes in McDougal’s Cave were inspired by the author’s own nocturnal explorations during his youth in Hannibal, Missouri.

[ True Williams’ illustration of Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher lost in McDougal’s Cave from the first edition of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Taken from http://www.twainquotes.com/Bats.html ]

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10 Brown, Injun Joe’s Ghost, 15.
Folklorist Kent C. Ryan claims, “Stories – and folklore in general – are inextricably linked with landscapes, overlying them snugly, bound to them and coloring them like paint on a barn wall. They are central means by which people organize their physical surroundings. This symbiosis between lore and landscape gets at a vital and often unappreciated relationship between geography and folklore.” ¹¹ These relationships are something Mark Twain appears to have understood very well. Hannibal, Missouri -- the town where Twain lived as a boy -- is home to a connected cave system called Cave Hollow. The most famous of the caves is now advertised as the “Mark Twain Cave” because of its recurring appearance in Twain's writing. It was originally named Saltpeter Cave before coming to be known as “McDowell’s Cave” in the mid-1840s. Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell was a well-respected member of his community, known for establishing one of the first medical colleges west of the Mississippi River in St. Louis. He later became notorious for obtaining cadavers for dissection through grave-robbery and for eventually preserving some of his own children (who died of natural causes) for medical experimentation. ¹²

McDowell heard about Saltpeter Cave and decided to purchase it in order to house an underground laboratory for his experiments. According to H. Dwight Weaver, who wrote an extensive history of Missouri caves and the legends associated with them, “This was in the late 1840s at the time when Samuel Clemens was growing up in Hannibal. Sam and his buddies were familiar with Saltpeter Cave in Cave Hollow. It was where the local

¹¹ Ryan, Mapping the Invisible Landscape, 56.
¹² H. Dwight Weaver, Missouri Caves in History and Legend (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 15.
youths often spent their free time playing in the cave’s confusing maze of tunnels. But McDowell did not know this.” Adolescents who wandered through the cave system are said to have encountered the corpse of McDowell’s daughter and spread rumors to their friends that eventually reached throughout Hannibal. Local authorities investigated and discovered the doctor’s laboratory and rescinded his access to the cave. 

There is no information available that suggests a young Sam Clemens was one of the local kids who discovered the body, but Twain was certainly well aware of the rumors

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13 Weaver, Missouri Caves, 15.
14 Ibid, 16.
that circulated about the cave. In his autobiography, *Life on the Mississippi*, he explicitly references the grotesque legend:

> There was an interesting cave or two below Hannibal, among the bluffs. I would have liked to revisit it, but not had the time. In my time the person who owned it turned it into a mausoleum for his daughter, aged fourteen. The body of this poor child was put into a cylinder filled with alcohol, and this was suspended in one of the dismal avenues of the cave. The top of the cylinder was removable; and it was said to be a common thing for the baser order of tourists to drag the dead face into view and examine it and comment upon it.  

Even if many of the children who explored McDonnell’s Cave did not come across anything too frightening, the knowledge that something horrific may have been waiting for them in the tunnels was a powerful draw for Hannibal youth. Like the children who explore McDougal’s Cave in *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*, a young Twain and his peers were drawn to the mystery. However, unlike Twain, Tom Sawyer’s fears and anticipations are realized.

> “No man ‘knew’ the cave. That was an impossible thing.”  

The initial, and possibly most important thing to recognize about legend-tripping is that while people (adolescents in particular) ostensibly participate in legend-tripping as a way to map out the world around them and gain a sense of independence and authority by mastering a physical geography or the telling of a legend, they do so because they ultimately cannot succeed in dispelling its mysteries. No individual can know the “true” complete histories

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16 Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 199.
of a place, even if they know it intimately. However, we can create history, as well as some
feeling of ownership over our environment through legends and folklore.
Chapter 2: Folklore and Legend Development

In this chapter, I will define folklore and outline how legends grow and circulate over time. I will also explain why folklore is instrumental in how people locate themselves spatially and comprehend the physical world around them. This will ultimately support my argument that legend-tripping has a strong effect on adolescents’ relationships to their environment and their local history.

What Is Folklore?

Folklorist Ralph Steele Boggs defines folklore as, "the lore, erudition, knowledge, or teachings of a folk, large social unit, kindred group, tribe, race, or nation, primitive or civilized, throughout its history." 17 A folk tale or legend can have one author or multiple authors, but the story itself becomes infinitely more important than its authorship. What ensures folklore’s survival is its ability to gain legitimacy for those who hear it or perform it, as well as the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Boggs emphasizes, “Folk tellers or doers and heroes or learners, like the last court of appeal, accept or reject it and modify it continually, thus putting upon it the stamp of group authorship, which is really what makes it folklore, regardless of its ultimate origin.” 18 Thus, folklore has the potential to remain just as relevant to people performing and consuming it in the present as it was when the stories first began to circulate.

18 Ibid, 4.
It is extremely difficult to determine exactly how long certain legends have existed and to predict approximately how long they will remain in people's consciousness. However, some folklorists think that they have a better chance to stay relevant in rural regions. Others, like Jan Brunvand who has written extensively about urban legends like alligators in the subways of New York, argue that people everywhere generate such stories, but do so in ways that fit their milieu. Folklore is certainly challenged by scientific facts and competing cultural narratives, so, while its survival depends on having its own space in which to thrive, its adaptability also weaves competing narratives into new iterations of a legend. The type known as modern legends is the most common in legend-tripping.

How Do Legends Grow?

While modern legends can be compared to older, established legends through a story’s narrative structure and style, scholars have a better chance of determining their origins and tracing the development of such a story. The modern legend exists in the middle of the spectrum between rumor and folklore, as it most usually pertains to more recent social and cultural anxieties and is not yet part of a larger accepted canon of American or regional folklore. Patrick B. Mullen has examined the modern legend in relation to rumor theory and rumor development, claiming that rumors arise out of

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unusual circumstances for which people seek an explanation. He writes, “Crises or unusual events are ambiguous by nature; questions arise about the event which cannot be answered by ordinary means. With most rumors the ambiguity of the original situation is resolved so that the rumor eventually dies. But when a situation remains ambiguous the chances are greater that a traditional legend will survive.”

A legend can arise and spread due to specific historical or traumatic events (as we will see in the two case studies towards the end of the paper), but the source of the legend can be as simple as unexplained material mysteries and symbolic contradictions. For instance, a popular legend-tripping site is the Black Angel monument in Oakland Cemetery in Iowa City. Folklorist Elizabeth Bird researched the adolescents who frequent the cemetery and found that the fascination with the statue seemed to stem from the its peculiar physical nature and the complicated symbols that go along with it:

The Black Angel is extremely ambiguous. It is the only statue of its kind in the cemetery and stands in an elevated, prominent position. It contains several inscriptions, all in a language which, though common in Iowa City once, is no longer understood. One name mentioned is given a birthdate, but no death date. But most of all, the statue is a Black Angel, which in our culture is a contradiction in terms. Black, of course, is a potent symbol that in various contexts may connote darkness, evil, death, sin, sorrow. Angels, too, are potent, multi-faceted symbols,

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but they connote the opposite: light, goodness, eternal life, purity, bliss. Angels are white; the two together do not make sense. 22

The Black Angel statue is an example of a site that provokes a response from those who encounter it because of its physical presence and its indecipherable meaning. In this case, the lack of historical information available on the physical monument allowed those who visited the site to construct their own history and meaning, as well as rituals and superstitions to contribute to the legend. The stories surrounding the statue gained credibility because of the narrative authority that the tellers temporarily demonstrate and their successful completion of what Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi call the “legend process.” 23


Dégh and Vázsonyi define the legend process as “the procedure by which legends are being generated, formulated, transmuted, and crystalized by means of communication through the legend conduit.” \(^{24}\) At no stage in the legend process is it necessary for the legend tellers to believe the story they are telling – what matters is the performance of authenticity. One can strengthen his or her version of the story by citing supposed eyewitnesses or by refuting other versions of the story in order to show that they care about the “truth.” Ultimately, however, “the text alone cannot tell us whether the raconteur believes his story.” \(^{25}\) Additionally, the written text alone does not reveal all there is to understand about a legend – performance is key. In her book *Legend and Belief*, Dégh emphasizes looking at legends as *conversations* between both teller and listener and between people and environment:

> Legends appear as products of conflicting opinions, expressed in conversation. They manifest in discussions, contradictions, additions, implementations, corrections, approvals, and disapprovals during some or all phases of their transmission, from their inception through various courses of elaboration, variation, decline, and revitalization. Anyone who has ever observed a live, naturally emerging, spontaneous legend-telling event and paid attention to the voices of all the participants and contributors would realize what a mistake it

\(^{24}\) Dégh and Vázsonyi, “Legend and Belief,” 96.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, 98.
would be to isolate the manifest texts from their situational and sociocultural environment.  

Like all legends, those that inspire legend-tripping lived through performed retellings and elaborations in conversations, but they also exceed the limits of textuality through trips themselves, or embellished tellings as if a trip really happened to the teller or someone he or she knows. Thus they reshape their situational and sociocultural environment as they unfold.

**Scary Stories and Camp Legends**

Legend-tripping is such a useful phenomenon to study because it epitomizes the spatial and interpersonal dialogue that Dégh discusses. However, it is also important to consider the impact of genre in such modern legends. Most legend-tripping excursions are made for the sake of encountering a narrative and an experience that instills fear in the legend-receiver, but similar scary stories are also commonly told with specific intentions in mind on behalf of the teller. These intentions involve eliciting particular responses from the listener that will cause them to behave in a certain way or bond with their peers. The camp legend is an example of this type of story. We will later see how the practice of legend-tripping appropriates and subverts the cautionary intentions behind such scary stories.

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Folklorist Bill Ellis completed an in-depth study of the camp legend “Ralph and Rudy,” the story of a murderous maniac concocted by a group of camp counselors at Longview Riding Camp near Georgetown, Kentucky in the summer of 1972. He follows the development and migration of the legend from Longview to Hiram House Camp near Cleveland, Ohio by Bill Henry, one of the story’s authors. The “Ralph and Rudy” legend is a story almost exclusively controlled by the counselors telling it; it was not typically circulated among campers themselves. This strict authorial control may remove it from the realm of folklore, since it is not organically transmitted through and shaped by the legend conduit and the story is thus “imposed on the audiences by counselors’ whims.” However, Ellis argues that the story can still be examined as a traditional legend for three reasons:

First, although the legend itself is unique, its incidents and overall structure are based on earlier horror legends and urban belief tales. Second, the story itself developed over a number of years, incorporating motifs demanded by the audience’s traditional expectations. Finally, the style of performance, particularly its ‘proto-dramatic’ nature, conforms to campfire conventions reinforced by campers’ responses.

The “Ralph and Rudy” legend has similarities with that of the Cropsey maniac, an urban legend that circulated in New York state summer camps, also in the 1970s. Lee Haring and

27 Bill Ellis, “‘Ralph and Rudy’: The Audience’s Role in Recreating a Camp Legend,” Western Folklore 41.2 (July, 1982): 170.
28 Ibid, 172-173.
Mark Breslerman interviewed various New York campers and camp counselors to discover the similarities and differences among the various versions of the story circulating at the time. Like “Ralph and Rudy”, camp counselors used the Cropsey Maniac legend of a fictional villain in the woods outside the camp to establish authority over younger campers and quell any desire to leave the campsite unattended. 29 Thus, it situates the camp ground as a safe place of order and control that campers learn to value. Any camper who disobeys the counselors is at risk of being killed by a maniac.

Even though they originate with known tellers, such legends are not necessarily static. Ellis notes the significant way in which Bill Henry altered his performance of the legend from Longview Camp to Hiram House. At Longview, the story “validates conventional power structures and mores in a way wholly appropriate to its context: an elite riding camp for politically conservative upper-class and upper-middle-class suburban whites.” 30 However, at Hiram House, where Henry recounted the story to lower-class African American children and adolescents, the story took on a new dimension in which authority was taken away from the counselors (as the ending scare of the story involves the maniac coming after the counselor) and thus encouraged a more mutually respectful relationship between Henry and the kids. 31 Thus, while the counselors certainly maintained control over the text and performance of the story, the audience’s reception of the tale had the ability to transform the legend.

30 Ellis, “Ralph and Rudy,” 179.
31 Ibid, 188.
Folklore, Space, and Regionalism

Lastly, it is easy to see legend and folklore as simply human inventions, but we must not overlook the dialogue that occurs between geography and the people who shape and perpetuate legends. While we can certainly find resemblances in narrative structure and performance among legends from all over the country, the individual histories of different regions and places are what transform legends into something more than fiction. In his book, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, Kent C. Ryden argues that the apparent similarities among legends are not signs of a legend's insignificance or lack of impact on those who shape or consume legends, but rather, “they are created and repeated for a reason, because they encode and carry important personal and cultural messages; they are deciphered the same way. The messages behind the patterns finally matter more than the patterns themselves.” 32 People create folklore and use folklore as a tool for mapping their physical environment, but also to show themselves that their physical environment is more than just geography. Folklore is a reminder that other people experience the same curious oddities that one stumbles upon by accident or the same monuments that one may pass by every day and not even consider.

Ultimately, the legends surrounding certain places make the human connection to them relatively more intimate, so even though we can cover many legends with the greater blanket term of American folklore, regional folklore maintains individuality because of its relationship with those who experience the region in depth. Some folklore

is so rooted in its region of origin and so dependent on local cultural and historical context that it is difficult for non-locals to understand. According to Ryden, “What can be lost sight of is that folklore vivifies geography, brings it alive with meaning and significance, reveals it to be a deeply known and active partner in life.” Considering folklore in this way will help us to better comprehend the phenomenon of legend-tripping and elevate the conversation surrounding legend-tripping above the conventional interpretation of it as a form of teenage socialization and delinquency.

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34 Ibid, 57.
Chapter 3: Legend-Tripping, Adolescent Performance, and Competing Fears of Death and Delinquency

In this chapter I define the practice of legend tripping, examine previous research, and discuss arguments about why adolescents participate in it. My own argument, based on evidence presented in this thesis, is that teenagers find more meaning in the experience than simply an excuse to rebel against authority figures. To make my case, I will also compare legend-tripping to other forms of teenage socialization and distinguish between legend-tripping and other forms of ghost tourism.

What Is Legend-Tripping?

“Legend-tripping” is a term conceived by folklorists to describe the contemporary phenomenon of adolescents making ritual pilgrimages, usually at night, to places that have mysterious rumors and legends surrounding them. Legend-tripping is typically not a solitary activity; it relies on one or more adolescents passing on the tale to other peers, along with daring them to face their fears and test one another’s bravery. This makes the experience very social and communal, usually with little physical danger involved. Some common practices that researchers have found to be recurring during legend-tripping-excursions include drinking, drug-use, sexual experimentation, graffiti-writing, and generally minor acts of teenage delinquency. However, the remains left over from such activity (especially graffiti) in the days following the pilgrimage are often the only evidence that legend-tripping occurred. “People who come and go in the middle of the night, decline invitations to be interviewed, or operate under the radar of participant-
observation research, for instance, nonetheless may contribute something to the ‘material record’.”  

 Thus, evidence of “legend-tripping” proper can be hard to come by. Most research on legend-tripping is based on testimonies from people who have admitted to completing such pilgrimages and the recorded legends themselves. However, the legends surrounding such tripping pilgrimages are unique from other forms of folklore because their significance is inseparable from the physical site. According to Bill Ellis, a folklorist who has arguably done the most research on legend-tripping to date, “The extreme variability of these legends itself suggests that the trip, not the legend, is the most important thing in the tradition. The stories alone cannot be understood without setting them into the context of this more complex folk tradition of deviant play. By emphasizing a certain place’s eeriness, they provide a mood of anticipation that is necessary to the trip.”  

 Therefore, the legend itself is dependent upon people interacting with it in both a verbal, cognitive manner and in a physical one – the legend depends on the legend trip for survival. If people do not perform the legend in some way, either by performing a ritual at the site or simply by making the pilgrimage in the first place, then there would be no way for the legend be sustained. In turn, if there were no rumors surrounding kids who have performed the ritual and lived to tell about it, or even better, did not live to tell

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about it, then there would be nothing daring future legend-trippers to visit the site. This cycle of performativity is where the concept of ostension comes into play.

**Ostension Theory and Performing Legends**

“Ostension” in folklore refers to the performance of a legend by an individual or a group of people, usually for the sake of play. Legend-tripping is a form of ostension, for those who legend-trip automatically participate in and perform the legend in some capacity by visiting the site. However, within the experience of legend-tripping, there are other forms of ostension. These mostly involve performing rituals associated with the legend, such as leaving an item at the site or taking an item from the site in an attempt to taunt the spirits that haunt it, or speaking and repeating certain words or phrases that are rumored to summon ghosts. These actions set the stage for any unusual occurrences that may happen afterward, which the group will then take as proof that the legend is real or proof that they have challenged a spirit or faced death and survived. These experiences, and anything that legend-trippers choose to interpret as a ‘sign’ reinforce the legend and make the trippers more likely to repeat the tale to their friends. They thus become part of the legend itself through their ostensive play.

As Linda Dégh and Bill Ellis detail, such ‘play’ can fit into one or more of three types of ostension.37 Delineating among these three types became very important in discussing legend-tripping and ostension in the 1980s, when there were many cases across

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37 Dégh, *Legend and Belief*. 
the United States of local authorities mistaking acts of ostensive play, such as graffiti, for evidence for the existence of satanic cults. Since many popular legend-tripping sites have stories surrounding them involving the devil or the possibility of entry into Hell, it is not surprising that ostensive play involving satanic imagery (spray-painting pentagrams or the number ‘666’ on buildings and tripping sites for example) or mock satanic rituals were involved. According to Ellis, this is how the three forms of ostension would play out in relation to “Satanic” practices:

1. Ostension: as part of the legend-trip’s characteristic invocation of the supernatural, teens commit ritual acts that may suggest Satanism.

2. Pseudo-Ostension: adolescents seeking to frighten peers or parents briefly impersonate ‘satanists’ or fabricate evidence of ‘cult’ rituals.

3. Quasi-Ostension: normal adolescent acts having nothing to do with occult practices are nevertheless seen by authorities as being part of ‘satanic’ rites.  

While it would be incorrect to claim that there are not adolescents and adults that perform such ostensive rituals with the intention of participating in a Satanic-motivated act, the majority of physical markings and remains found at legend-tripping sites (sometimes even things as gruesome as animal mutilation) are examples of pseudo-ostension or quasi-ostension. They are fueled more by fun, the attempt to scare oneself and others, and the desire to experience the legend and help others do the same later on by leaving unsettling marks behind.  

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39 Ellis, “Legend-Trips and Satanism.”
Ultimately, ostension makes legend-tripping a more ‘real’ experience for the tripper and those that visit the sites after them. The more one gives in to the legend, the more effective the trip is and the more significant memories of the experience are. Ostension plays a large role in the temporary mind-altering impact that legend-tripping has on the individual or the group – hence the link between its name and the more familiar concept of drug-tripping. By performing the legend, trippers can willingly cast aside their skepticism and inhabit a physical and psychological space in which the conventional rules and boundaries of society fade into the background. Although very few people in the cold, sober light of day would admit to believing that the spirits in a building or a graveyard could harm them, the suspension of disbelief that occurs on a legend-trip can be very powerful. This level of intensity in legend participation and performance is also what differentiates legend-tripping from the more controlled and less controversial venue of ghost tourism.

**Ghost Tourism**

Ghost tourism is a fascinating recent development in the tourist industry. Ghost tours provide a space in which the relationship between legend and recorded history is recognized and performed. There are certainly ostensive elements in ghost tourism, but they are limited by the one-sided nature of the legend performance. Ghost tours feature a guide who is well-versed in the ghost stories particular to the town or building through which they are leading the tour. Aside from some minor narrative details and personal
interpretations that may vary, the story that each group hears is basically the same. However, there is not the same degree of authorship involved in such tales as in the development of camp legends because the stories express the interests of the business running the tours, not those of the individuals telling the stories. This is also one of the reasons why ghost tourism lacks the authenticity of legend-tripping and the organic quality that such legends possess.

There is also a significant difference in the way that ghost tourism utilizes the physical environment, or haunted site, as opposed to the way in which legend-trippers do. In his study of ghost tours across the United Kingdom, Julian Holloway describes how they use architecture to create the potential for blurring the lines between physical reality and the spiritual world:

Ghost tours are performed in a way that situates knowledge and understanding as interstitial. The common use of doorways, openings to alleyways and windows as storytelling locations adds an architectural emphasis to the focus on thresholds between worlds. This ‘what if?’ quality resounds with questions of ‘what lies beyond?’, and a register of possibility allows matter to speak in diversely imaginative ways and with creative inquisition.⁴⁰

So the audience does engage in quasi-ostensive play by traveling through the site, engaging with the legend as a listener and observer, and by acquiring a sense of possibility that ghosts inhabit the grounds in which they walk. However, the thresholds of which Holloway speaks are boundaries that the audience is not expected, and not meant,

to cross in the tour. Legend-tripping, on the other hand, creates the same sense of curiosity and temptation to succumb to the legend, but the tripper transgresses. They go where they are not allowed, they leave their mark where it does not belong, and they encourage others to do the same.

**Coming of Age Through Legend-Tripping**

In describing how teenagers participate in legend-tripping, Bill Ellis claims that “The trip is the significant thing to the adolescent, and the legend serves mainly as an excuse to escape adult supervision, commit anti-social acts and experiment illicitly with drugs and sex.” 41 While such activities are certainly a common feature of the adolescent legend-trip, this statement is an over-simplification of how legend-tripping functions in the lives of the teenagers and young adults who venture on such nocturnal pilgrimages. Such explanations of teenage behavior among those who examined the legend-tripping phenomenon throughout the 1970s and 1980s are understandable because they were facing the heightened crisis of “Satanic Panic” during these decades. Nevertheless, now that fear of teenage devil-worshippers has lost some of its charge in recent years, we can take a broader view of legend-tripping and why teenagers are drawn to it.

In a morning edition of “The Geraldo Show” that aired on November 19, 1987, reporter Geraldo Rivera raised the threat of teenage devil-worshipping to the American public in his story, “Satanic Cults and Children”. Rivera claimed, “Estimates are that there

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41 Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending*, 124.
are over one million Satanists in this country. The majority of them are linked in a highly organized, very secret network. From small towns to large cities, they have attracted police and FBI investigation to their satanic ritual child abuse, child pornography and grizzly satanic murders. The odds are that this is happening in your town.” 42 Fear of the devil corrupting society, especially the youth of society, is not a modern anxiety; it has existed in some form throughout history and the Western world. There is no discernible origin for “satanic panic” as we know it, but the specific panic that became associated with modern legend-tripping and ostension can be traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Parallels have been drawn between the beginning of satanic panic and the Manson murders, which fostered a cultural connection between (loosely-defined) cults and behavior that was either misunderstood or deemed antisocial and those in which murders and violence actually occurred. 43

Ironically, rumors involving satanic cults commonly develop in ways similar to modern legends: while adolescents subscribe to and perpetuate the tales that draw them to legend-tripping sites, the tall tales regarding their trips also circulate and become validated by adults and authority figures in their community. As a result, legends gained strength from a cycle in which parents and community leaders propagated rumors as a warning to others, especially their children, and their kids subsequently appropriating those stories for their own legend-trips. Unfortunately, the material evidence left over

42 Show transcript.
from legend-trips added to the myth that there are organized satanic networks in local areas all over the country.

Like legend-tripping stories, satanic rumors are more concentrated in rural areas. Jeffrey Victor conducted in-depth studies of rumor-panics in southwestern New York and northwestern Pennsylvania in the late 1980s. In attempting to understand why such regional concentration occurs, Victor writes, “One hypothesis is that underlying socioeconomic stresses, and the resultant cultural crisis in traditional values, are particularly acute in rural and small town areas...A complementary hypothesis is that the communication networks that transmit the legend, especially among fundamentalist Protestants, are stronger in rural and small-town areas.” 44 The perseverance of satanic rumor-legends is notable because, in many cases, even local police authorities believed them wholeheartedly and contributed to their legitimacy and circulation. Local newspapers are also more likely to substantiate rumors with statements from town residents, whereas larger media outlets may address the rumors with more skepticism. Aside from the Geraldo Rivera report and a few other small news “exposes”, the national news media did not given much attention to satanic panic and rumors of satanic cults. Like legend-tripping, it is only once we examine specific cases in relation to one another that we begin to see the larger legend-making process and phenomenon taking place.

Efforts to alleviate the very real fear that teenagers living in rural areas were worshipping the Devil led those who have examined legend-tripping to emphasize the

more social aspects of the excursions. Folklorist Bill Ellis contends that legend-tripping is a benign form of socialization in order to debunk the threat of teenage Satanism. However, he also acknowledges legend-tripping as a rite of passage for adolescents because it presents them with a challenge that they must overcome by defying whatever spirit or presence is said to be found at the site. In this sense, legend-tripping can be seen as a more traditional activity, one that is more positive than negative for adolescent development because it is a way for them to safely experiment with facing fears and testing courage.

Adults also view legend-tripping as threatening behavior because of the nature of the legends themselves and the fact that teens rarely legend-trip with adult supervision or permission and do so under the cover of darkness. Yet, closer examination may reveal adolescent legend-trippers acting out rather traditional cultural scripts when they interact with one another. First, while the real test of courage comes from legend-trippers daring one another to prove bravery, such dares are rarely malicious or reflective of a desire to put friends in any real danger. Second, in mixed-sex legend-tripping groups, adolescents are likely to conform to traditional gender expectations, with the male trippers attempting to display more bravery in front of the females who are expected to display timidity and reluctance to continue forward on the trip.

In order to further explore the ways in which legend-tripping straddles the line between traditional adolescent social behavior and more deviant behavior, it is helpful to

examine legend-tripping in relation to another modern teenage phenomenon: cruising. Cruising, or driving as a social activity, involves traveling in an automobile with or without a particular destination in mind. The emphasis is on the driving itself, not where the driver and passengers end up, and it is especially common among teenagers who still view driving as more of an adventure than a necessity. The similarity between these activities is that both occur in adolescents’ lives at the point in their development when teens begin to explore their environment with their peers without parental supervision. Also, teens are more likely to embark on legend-tripping excursions when they have transportation to the sites, which are typically in remote places.

Another similarity between the two is that cruising and legend-tripping intimidate adults and authority figures because they are both potentially harmless and potentially deviant. Adolescents are faced with the opportunity for what may be considered reckless behavior in both circumstances, which would make it easier to classify both as deviant. However, both also provide an important outlet for teens to chase and grasp a sense of independence that is not entirely out of control, while also learning more about mapping their physical environments. In his study of adolescent cruising, Charles McCormick claims, “age-graded movements of increasing complexity have long been considered an important component in the development of youth; therefore, there is reason to believe that adults would have found cruising a relatively desirable activity for their adolescents who literally and symbolically needed to explore and master their expanding world.”

The cognitive maps that adolescents create most likely focus on the places to which they feel emotionally connected and at which they have had memorable experiences. In the realm of legend-tripping, the physical nature of a particular site plays an important role in its importance in an individual's memory. Whether or not a site is physically unusual or compelling also affects whether it remains a popular destination for legend-trippers over time and whether or not the legends associated with less popular places are repeated. For instance, Donald Holly and Casey Cordy’s examination of the legend-tripping activities that regularly take place at the gravesites of Mercy Brown (Exeter, Rhode Island), Nellie Vaughn (West Greenwich, Rhode Island), and Sarah Tillinghast (Exeter) sheds some light on this issue. Their research and interviews have led them to believe that Sarah’s legend is not as popular as the ones associated with the other two gravesites:

The small and visible location of the cemetery and the nondescript nature of Sarah’s tombstone may make the cemetery an unattractive place in which to recount or ‘experience’ a legend – particularly for legend-trippers. In short, Sarah’s legend might not be as popular as Mercy’s because the ‘arena’ in which Sarah’s legend would be told and experienced is not as compelling a place as the cemeteries where Mercy Brown and Nellie Vaughn are buried. 47

The varying degrees of popularity among the different grave markers as legend-tripping sites reveals something about what trippers are looking for in a good tripping destination.

47 Holly and Cordy, “What’s In a Coin?” 342.
A small location that is easily visible by people outside the cemetery is not ideal, for trippers do not want to be caught or interrupted. Also, the journey to the legend-tripping site is a very important part of the overall trip because it provides participants with an opportunity to recount the legend to the group and create a mood of anticipation and suspension of disbelief before arrival. Thus, a site that is very easy to reach may detract from the experience.

![Mercy Brown's grave in Exeter, Rhode Island. Taken from http://www.triprg.com/rihaunts.htm](http://www.triprg.com/rihaunts.htm)

Most importantly, a good legend-tripping site is one that has mysterious, unusual physical qualities. The Black Angel monument in Iowa City discussed earlier is an example of an attractive tripping destination because of its ambiguity and the conflicting meanings offered by its appearance. 48 Another example that Bill Ellis describes in his

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essay on ostension lies on Peach Ridge near Logan, Ohio. He writes, “One of the small cemeteries on the ridge, according to these adolescent stories, contains the graves of witches and therefore serves as a meeting place for those practicing black magic. Adding to the cemetery’s power is its position in the exact center of a natural pentagram formed by the peaks of five surrounding hills.” 49 This site functions on multiple levels for the legend-tripper; it evokes Satanic imagery through its natural layout, while also providing physical terrain for the tripper to navigate in order to reach the specific graves for which they are searching. Ultimately, the environmental specifics of the tripping site and the area surrounding the site shape the trip itself because they give the individuals room to explore a natural setting before crossing over into a realm reserved for spirits.

Most, if not all, stories attached to legend-tripping sites center around death; the deaths of people clearly buried there, the deaths (murders, suicides, accidents, or all three) that are rumored to have happened there, and the threat of potential death for those who visit. Sites sometimes contain physical evidence of the people who have passed through them and trippers are drawn to finding this evidence. In their essay on the material culture of legend-tripping, Donald Holly and Casey Cordy describe how places like cemeteries have both recorded history and personal interpretations written all over them. They write, “Whether it is through the architecture, landscaping, epitaph inscriptions, or internment policies, cemeteries represent the wishes, beliefs, and desires of the living...They become repositories for modern memories and musings about

ancestors, life, death, and the afterlife; contested places where differing ideologies, memories, and meanings, compete for the right to speak for the dead.”

So why are adolescents so drawn to places associated with such dark narratives? One reason may be because immersing oneself in such stories and performing a ritual that supposedly brings harm upon the legend-tripper allows the tripper to confront the fear of death. In her study of college students at Binghamton University in New York performing the famous “Bloody Mary” mirror ritual (typically popular predominantly among pre-adolescents), folklorist Elizabeth Tucker claims that such dark self-exploration through legend-performance is ultimately psychologically positive for young adults who are facing the world around them with more independence than ever before:

College students tell many stories in which the shadow, the dangerous, destructive part of the psyche, seems to be dominant. Although negative, the shadow is widely recognized by Jungians as one side of a healthful balance; subversive and self-destructive behavior can lead in a positive direction. Legend texts gathered from college campuses across the United States suggest that students feel compelled to confront the specter of suicide. Having briefly descended to the realm of the dead, they can move on with their lives, strengthened by a richer perception of life’s boundaries.

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50 Holly and Cordy, “What’s In A Coin?” 335.
By testing death in a space in which the legend-tripper is essentially already sure they will triumph against it, they come away from the experience with a greater sense of control. Another difficult part of growing up involves coming to terms with the chance that one can die at any age and that sometimes one's peers may decide to take their own lives. Therefore it is not uncommon for many legend-tripping stories to involve teen suicides as the cause of the alleged hauntings.

Thus, legend-tripping does not only have potential in adolescents’ lives for providing a space for growth in personal and social lives. It can be a powerful, even necessary experience for teens to confront what they fear the most. Legend-tripping creates a venue in which individuals can articulate such fears in a safe space. Legend performance is a tradition that has always been important in cultures around the world because it helps storytellers and audiences create some sort of understanding of their surrounding world, and we see it currently expressed in the United States in the form of legend-tripping.
CHAPTER 4: Legend-Tripping Case Studies: Teenage Adventurers and Real-Life Boogeymen in Suburban America

“We walked under the bridge and I remember having the feeling that we were not alone. We stopped every once in a while and would listen for sounds we thought we heard. We just kept hearing rustling. My friend said he heard footsteps. I remember not feeling alone and wanting to get out of there.”

In order to better understand legend-tripping and its relationship with local history and local legend, it is helpful to look closely at some specific examples of popular haunted sites. The two sites that this section will examine are the Willowbrook State School and Sea View Hospital in Staten Island, New York and the Bunny Man Bridge in Clifton, Virginia. Willowbrook and Bunny Man Bridge are both frequently visited by adolescent legend-trippers and have had legends about them circulating for decades, both orally and more recently on internet forums on ghost hunting and haunted locales. The legends associated with each site are strongly rooted in the history of the surrounding region, further contributing to their validity in the minds of legend-trippers. However, the two locations are physically very distinct from one another, so they make for different tripping experiences. This allows us to see the role that the physicality of each site plays in the formation of its legends.

52 From a personal interview the author conducted with a 23-year-old legend-tripper from Northern Virginia. He is referring to his most recent experience visiting Bunny Man Bridge in Clifton, Virginia. The tripper will be referred to throughout the paper as “Subject 3.”
I will also discuss the recorded testimonies of two anonymous legend-trippers, from Staten Island and Northern Virginia, respectively. Each provides great insight into how local adolescents experience their own legend-tripping adventures and how they interpret them a few years later. These interviews, along with legend-tripping stories that local people share on internet forums, reveal a great deal about how legends are circulated and how nocturnal excursions shape one’s perception and memories of their hometowns and local environments.

**Willowbrook State School/ Sea View Hospital – Staten Island, New York**

In 1829, the Richmond Country Poor Farm was established in Staten Island to provide the homeless and unemployed a place to perform labor in exchange for room and board. In 1893, the Poor Farm was transformed into the Farm Colony, a center for agriculture and farming. The complex underwent further changes throughout the twentieth century, most notably with the construction of the Sea View Tuberculosis Hospital in 1913, which was considered to be one of the most effective hospitals in the country for the treatment of tuberculosis. The hospital was closed after a tuberculosis vaccine was discovered in 1946 and the buildings were abandoned when new Sea View facilities were constructed across the street.  

The Willowbrook State School, an institution for children with mental disabilities, was constructed in 1942 near the Sea View/Farm Colony complex. The facility was the

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source of a great number of scandals in latter half of the twentieth century. Between the 1950s and 1970s, researchers carried out a study in which healthy patients were injected with a virus that caused hepatitis and then monitored its effects on them.\textsuperscript{54} Willowbrook later became infamous for overcrowding, inadequate living and sanitary conditions, and physical and sexual abuse of patients by staff members. In 1972, Geraldo Rivera’s expose on the facility, entitled \textit{Willowbrook: The Last Disgrace}, which earned him a Peabody award, was instrumental in the eventual closure of the school in 1983.\textsuperscript{55} Part of Willowbrook was later incorporated into a new campus for the College of Staten Island, while other buildings remain abandoned on the Greenbelt forest property.

The grounds of Sea View and Willowbrook seem almost tailor-made for legend-trippers. The exteriors of the buildings, now covered with graffiti, welcome the visitor to even more disturbing interiors. Most of the furniture and belongings that were inside the buildings before they were closed and abandoned are still there, and many former Willowbrook State School residents would return to the familiar territory and live in the dilapidated structures. There is even an abandoned chapel and playground, and an underground tunnel system, each of which has its own mysterious atmosphere and meaning for those who encounter it. A 23-year-old female Staten Islander, who I will refer to as “Subject 1” \textsuperscript{56} described her experience of visiting the Sea View grounds in the Fall of 2002: “Some of the buildings had rusted bed frames in them. There were a few abandoned

\textsuperscript{55} Geraldo Rivera, \textit{Willowbrook: a report on how it is and why it doesn’t have to be that way} New York: Random House, 1972)
\textsuperscript{56} Name changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of the interview subject.
cars on the grounds and some stained mattresses. The old church had part of the ceiling caved in and half the stairs either missing or rotted and rusting off. We decided to try to climb up, but were forced to give up as the building was in such disrepair.”

Sea View, while partially visible from the street, is not an easy play to reach or navigate. Teens seem to usually crawl through a hole that a peer has made in the fence surrounding the property and proceed to tread carefully around the obviously insecure structures. The physical nature of the buildings, as well as the obstacles that the tripper faces, add to the overall experience. However, the stories of the site, both legendary and historical, are just as significant.

This historical information is crucial for understanding why the abandoned buildings of Sea View Hospital and the Willowbrook School became ideal locations for legend-tripping. The site’s dark history of illness and death, and the Willowbrook abuse scandal remains fresh in the minds of Staten Island residents. The dilapidated, vandalized buildings are visible reminders of a troubling past and a time in which the borough was less developed and more rural. The stretch of forest land known as The Greenbelt, in which the Sea View and Willowbrook buildings can be found, is the last significant piece of land in Staten Island that has been protected from urban development. Therefore, legend-tripping at these locations gives one access to a past in a state of gradual erasure. Urban legends arose as soon as the troubling history of these institutions collided with the threat of a real-life boogeyman on Staten Island.

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57 personal email correspondence with the author.
In 2009, filmmakers Joshua Zeman and Barbara Brancaccio documented this “boogeyman” in Cropsey. They examined a series of child abductions and murders that occurred over a twenty-year period on Staten Island in relation to their own adolescent
experiences of legend-tripping on the Sea View and Willowbrook grounds. Andre Rand, a convicted kidnapper and sex offender, as well as a former employee at Willowbrook, was the prime suspect in the disappearance of six physically and mentally handicapped children from 1972 to 1987. In 1987, the body of a kidnapped girl, Jennifer Schweiger, was discovered in a shallow grave on the grounds of Willowbrook, sealing Rand’s guilt in the eyes of the public. The film explores the interaction between the real-life case and the urban legends that began to surface among citizens, adults and children, regarding Rand, the abandoned buildings, and the possibility of cult activity. In The New York Times’ coverage of the documentary, Brancaccio says, “Cropsey is really a movie about storytelling. It’s about a small-town location, a series of unfortunate events that affects the entire community and what they told themselves about it. By the time we get to court and see the outcome, I think it’s not relevant. The people had determined what the story of the missing children was, and it had become a part of their own mythology.”

The buildings of Sea View and Willowbrook are sites where the lines between “fact” and “legend” are undoubtedly blurred, for both the children and the adults of Staten Island. For legend-trippers and the parents and authority figures who warned them about exploring the Greenbelt woods, the Cropsey Maniac legend appears to have arisen in Staten Island in response to the anxiety over the child disappearances in the borough. As I mentioned earlier, the legend of the Cropsey Maniac, an axe-wielding

psychopath who stalks and kills disobedient kids who wander where they are not wanted, originated among summer campers in upstate New York. The story served as a bonding experience for campers, as well as a way to prevent them from leaving the camp grounds and exploring the surrounding woods.

According to Lee Haring and Mark Breslerman, who carefully studied the growth and circulation of the legend among summer camps in the late 1970s, “The central character of the Cropsey maniac is always a respected male adult typifying the values of the older generation from a middle-class adolescent’s point of view.” Variations can be seen in the Staten Island version of the Cropsey character, who is portrayed as more of a boogeyman figure than as a fallen hero seeking revenge for the death of his son (as the camp version of Cropsey is portrayed). However, if Cropsey is compared to the real-life villain Andre Rand, then one can view the character as a representation of the real fear of child abductions in the area, and of the threat that members of one’s own community can pose. Rand (and other former Willowbrook residents) had allegedly lived in and around the abandoned buildings for years, so reality seems to have spilled over into the legend in numerous ways.

Unsurprisingly, rumors of cult activity surfaced in response to adolescent activity at various popular legend-tripping sites, and some level of satanic panic has continued in Staten Island to this day. A local newspaper article from July, 2009 features interviews with two woman who stumbled across a mutilated animal in a public park, possibly a dog or a goat, wrapped in a white sheet. The women explain how they both had “heard stories

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from a neighbor describing three or four people dressed in white and black robes, coming into the park at night.” 61 Numerous Satanic symbols and graffiti markings can be found on the Sea View and Willowbrook buildings and there is a disparity in what those markings mean for teenagers and adults. However, it cannot be denied that viewing such symbols in the context of a legend-trip can be powerful. In her interview, Subject 1 specifically noted such an experience: “One thing that still sticks in my mind ten years later is a door we found. It was in the side of a concrete wall. The door had a very small hole right about eye level and right under it ‘666’ was written in red. I rationalized that some stupid kid like me had probably written it, but the idea that it might’ve had darker origins is still kind of creepy.” 62

There are many popular legend-tripping sites on Staten Island, but the grounds of Sea View hospital and Willowbrook are ones whose legends are very much intertwined with their lurid (and not-so-distant) histories. The adults who use stories of maniacal child murders and scary figures who roam the grounds have a legitimate framework for these fears, for their own coming-of-age experiences on Staten Island were shaped by threats of kidnapping and murder. When kids explore the woods of Willowbrook, they may or may not know that a little girl’s body was found there or that the buildings they walk through were the subject of so much public scrutiny. It is possible that rumors and legends about cults, ghosts, and suicide obscure even more troubling truths that lurk within those walls and make these disturbing parts of Staten Island’s history easier to

62 personal email correspondence with the author.
swallow later on for adolescents. The stories are just specific enough to teach kids to be wary for their safety in such an environment, but are also general enough to entice them to investigate the mysteries themselves.

In this sense, legend-tripping serves as a rite of passage not only because it allows kids to conquer their fears, but also because it allows them to become better acquainted with their local history, both the celebrated parts and the parts that many people wish they could forget. Legend-tripping can be powerful in this regard because, although the stories that trippers circulate are most likely not accurate representations of what happened originally at a site, they still have the potential to keep the memories of those who inhabited a place alive.

**Bunny Man Bridge – Clifton, Virginia**

The legend of the Bunny Man is another story whose origin is difficult to determine, but is also dependent on historical and regional context, as well as the particular nature of a legend-tripping site for its meaning and impact. The Bunny Man himself has been described in sightings as an axe-wielding man dressed in a bunny suit. He has allegedly been sighted throughout Northern Virginia, Maryland, and the Washington, D.C. area, but the legend itself is concentrated at the at the structure commonly referred to as “Bunny Man Bridge”, a one-lane railroad viaduct at the dead end of Colchester Road in Clifton/Fairfax Station, Virginia.
The fact that the bridge has become such a popular legend-tripping site is not surprising, based on its appearance alone, which is peculiar and mysterious. A twenty-three year old male legend-trpper who I will refer to as “Subject 2”\textsuperscript{63} described the bridge in an interview:

It’s this really tiny mouse-hole of a tunnel, a perfect half circle, just big enough for one car to go through. It’s white-washed and built out of solid stone. And I believe there’s two tracks on top of it. It’s very ‘dungeon-ish’. It’s a creepy bridge for sure. And walking through it is kind of scary in and of itself because if a car comes by you can get nailed. There’s nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. And it’s just surrounded by farmland, nothing around.\textsuperscript{64}

Encountering the bridge at night is especially frightening for the legend-trpper because although the viaduct is rather short length-wise (a fact that is clearly visible in the light of day), it is nearly impossible to see through to the other side in the darkness for there are no streetlights on this section of Colchester Road. Therefore, it is almost as if the nature of the bridge changes at night. The same could be said about many other legend-trpping sites, which of course become scarier in darkness, but Bunny Man Bridge appears to become a portal that could lead anywhere, or to anyone.

\textsuperscript{63} Name changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of the interview subject.
\textsuperscript{64} Personal interview with the author, February 3, 2012.
The legend of the Bunny Man himself owes much of its continued relevance among legend-trippers to the Internet. While stories about the Bunny Man have circulated locally for about forty years, people interested in the legend have made attempts at telling very detailed versions of the story with greater historical specificity within the venues of websites and forums. Probably the most “complete” recorded version of the Bunny Man legend was posted on a ghost story website called “Castle of Spirits.” The author, Timothy C. Forbes, begins his piece with the statement, “What I am about to tell you is entirely true.” He claims that the Bunny Man originated in 1904, when a bus transporting a group of convicts from an asylum in Fairfax to what is now Lorton Prison crashed and the prisoners fled into the surrounding woods. All but two convicts were recovered, but eventually one of them was found dead, hanging from the Fairfax Station

[ Bunny Man Bridge in Clifton, Virginia. Personal photograph taken February 12, 2012 ]

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Bridge. After a few more months had passed, the authorities assumed that the remaining convict had starved to death in the woods and gave up their search. However, dead bunny carcasses began appearing near the bridge in October, 1905, and on Halloween night, teenagers visiting the bridge were found disemboweled and hanged from the bridge just like the deceased convict. Similar murders supposedly occurred throughout the next few decades, all involving teenagers who dared to enter the bridge after midnight and faced swift death at the hands of the Bunny Man. 66

According to Brian A. Conley, Historian-Archivist at the Fairfax County Public Library and author of “The Bunny Man Unmasked: The Real Life Origins of an Urban Legend”, there is no evidence to support any of Forbes’ claims regarding the legend. There has never been an asylum in Fairfax County, Lorton Prison was not established until 1910 (so no convicts could have been transferred there in 1904), and the names of the two escaped convicts (Douglas J. Grifon and Marcus Wallster) do not appear in the Fairfax court records. 67 However, stories for which we do have recorded evidence involve sightings of and interactions with a man in a bunny costume in Fairfax County. On October 22, 1970, The Washington Post published an article entitled “Man in Bunny Suit Sought in Fairfax”:

Air Force Cadet Robert Bennett told police that shortly after midnight last Sunday he and his fiancée were sitting in a car in the 5400 block of Guinea Road when a man ‘dressed in a white suit with long bunny ears’ ran from nearby bushes and

66 Ibid.
shouted: ‘You’re on private property and I have your tag number.’ Then the ‘rabbit’ threw a wooden-handled hatchet through the right font car window, the first-year cadet told police.  

Another story, published only nine days after the first, featured the account of a private security guard who encountered a man in a bunny suit chopping at the roof support on a new house with an axe. Once again, the bunny man protested to people being on the property and ran off into the woods.

The only other detailed source on the Bunny Man is an undergraduate paper by University of Maryland student Patricia Johnson in 1973, entitled simply “The Bunny Man.” In her paper, Johnson interviewed thirty-three students who were familiar with the Bunny Man legend. Most of their stories synch up with, or are modified versions of, the accounts covered by The Washington Post: Eighteen involve the Bunny Man frightening people with an ax, fourteen involve the Bunny Man attacking people (usually a couple) in a car, and five involve the Bunny Man committing acts of vandalism. Only three accounts mention the Bunny Man murdering anyone. Thus, while it is possible that the man in the bunny suit appropriated an existing legend for his own purposes, it is more likely that the longer, more historical legend of which Forbes wrote instead grew out of the 1970 appearances of the Bunny Man. The main function that Forbes’ version of the story serves is to attach the mysterious, terrifying figure of the ax-wielding Bunny Man to a specific, equally mysterious location. The legend gains more legitimacy with historical background

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70 Patricia Johnson, “The Bunny Man,” (University of Maryland: 1973)
and specificity, and such specificity must have a site to which story-tellers and legend-trippers can refer.

In an interview conducted for this paper, a twenty-three year old male legend-tripper from Woodbridge, Virginia gave detailed accounts of the numerous times that he visited Bunny Man Bridge. I will refer to him as “Subject 3.” 71 When asked about his opinion regarding the validity of the legend, and what he thought about it when he was a teenaged legend-tripper compared to the present, he admitted his certainty that the story was false, but also noted, “When I first went there I completely believed every single shred of that story, to the letter. And I think it was really important that I did...So in a sense, it’s completely real. As a story, people believe it whole-heartedly...It’s not true in a historical sense, but its true in the sense that there are kids that completely believe this and they’ve made it true.” 72

Bunny Man Bridge is an extremely popular legend-tripping site and is featured regularly on ghost-hunting and supernatural Internet message boards, so it attracts its fair share of both local trippers and trippers that travel just to visit it. It also sees its fair share of ostensive activities. The bridge is located on privately owned land, so it is well-maintained, and no graffiti or materials that adolescents may leave behind remain there for very long. However, a trip through the viaduct during the daytime reveals multiple noticeable paint jobs, cover-ups of graffiti markings. Also, while the area is cleaned regularly, so many teens visit the bridge that if one visits it late at night, they are likely to find (sometimes disturbing) material evidence left over from trippers who visited earlier

71 Name changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of the interview subject.
72 personal interview with the author, February 12, 2012.
that evening. It is not uncommon to find dead animals around the bridge, the result of kids reenacting the bunny killings associated with the site in order to scare fellow trippers. 73 Trippers test the legend by entering the tunnel either in their cars or on foot. Subject 3 described how he and his friend, Subject 2, walked under the bridge and kept stopping to listen for noises, certain that there was another presence following them. He claims, “I guess overall, the more willing you are to embrace the bridge, the scarier it gets. And I think my friend was very willing, so it was like we willed something to happen. But not in the sense that we tricked ourselves; there was something there.” 74

The legend of Bunny Man Bridge is a powerful one that seems to resonate significantly for the people who know it. Unlike the Willowbrook grounds, in which many kids frequent the site without knowing the specific histories of the buildings, experiencing Bunny Man Bridge depends heavily on one knowing the stories of what allegedly occurred there. Although the historical details of the legend can easily be disputed and disproven, this does not seem to make a difference to legend trippers because of their interactions with the environment and their control over the stories they tell. As we see from Subject #3’s interview, one can firmly believe that the legend is false, yet still visit the site multiple times with friends because of how powerful the experience can be for themselves and others.

73 personal interview (Subject 3).
74 Ibid.
Staten Island, New York and Northern Virginia are very different places geographically, demographically, and historically. However, the reason why the legends that develop in these towns, as well as the sites to which they are connected, maintain such importance in the lives of the adolescents are very similar. At the end of his interview, Subject 3 explained what the Bunny Man legend ended up meaning to him, and I believe it applies to teenagers’ experiences with local legends:

What the story did for me is this: I was an army brat. I grew up in Colorado, then Pennsylvania, then Texas. So moving here, I never felt really attached to Woodbridge. I was here for six or seven years and I hated it. It’s just like any other suburb. So the story allowed me to really own this town. You know, for someone growing up in a city, there’s all these places you can go where unique things happened. It’s very easy to make ghost stories out of places like that. And in Woodbridge, it’s kind of hard, but I also think that’s what makes the story all the scarier.  

The type of ownership described above is crucial to understanding what someone can get out of legend-tripping. The fleeting sense of freedom or independence that an adolescent can feel from visiting a local haunt pales in comparison to the connection formed between an individual and a place. The ownership of history, of regional identity, and of memory is a potential source of power for an individual.

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75 personal interview (Subject 3).
CHAPTER 5: The Media and the Future of Legend-Tripping: From *The Blair Witch Project* to the Message Boards

*Michael Williams:* There’s people out here messing with us, and I’m not going to play with that.
*Heather Donahue:* How do you know it was people?
*Michael Williams:* Well, even if it isn’t, I’m not going to play with that, either.


Modern legend-tripping and the ways in which urban legends are disseminated are changing significantly due to the Internet. People no longer have to rely solely on their peers or social circles for learning about local haunts. One can search a multitude of websites and message boards dedicated to haunted sites, learn about the legends associated with them, and read testimonies from people who have visited such places. In this sense, the information available on legend-tripping locations is not restricted to one's hometown stories and oral histories. However, the way such tales are presented and recycled online strongly resembles the now-familiar legend process. This final chapter will explore the direction in which legend-tripping appears to be headed, first with an in-depth look at the 1999 faux-documentary *The Blair Witch Project*, the surprise hit independent film that brought legend-tripping mainstream attention. Lastly, I will look at online legend-tripping conversations on message boards in order to show how the Internet is creating a population of self-aware, self-proclaimed ‘legend-trippers’ (both adolescents and adults) who use the forums as a venue for legend formation and sharing.
Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez’s 1999 independent horror film opens with a title card that states, “In October of 1994, three students filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary called ‘The Blair Witch Project.’ A year later their footage was found.” 76 The Blair Witch Project was completed on a budget of approximately $25,000 and went on to gross $249 million worldwide. 77 The “found footage” of the three missing filmmakers, presumably all killed by the Blair Witch herself, comprises the plot of the film. While the faux-documentary production style of the movie, along with the intentional dearth in publicity appearances of the then-unknown actors, contributed to audience confusion regarding the authenticity of what they saw on screen, the online marketing campaign behind the film played a significant role as well.

The now-infamous promotional website for The Blair Witch Project 78 originally contained only the following sections: “Mythology”, “The Filmmakers”, “The Aftermath”, and “The Legacy.” The site now has a link through which visitors can purchase a DVD of the film, but there is still no reference to its fictitious nature. The section titled “Filmmakers” lists Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael Williams as responsible for the footage, not Myrick and Sánchez, which is not entirely inaccurate.

76 The Blair Witch Project, DVD, directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. 1999; Artisan Entertainment.
77 John Young, “‘The Blair Witch Project’ 10 Years Later: Catching up with the directors of the horror sensation,” Entertainment Weekly,
78 www.blairwitch.com
since the actors did actually complete the filming themselves. It also contains a photograph of them allegedly taken less than a week before their disappearance. 79 The “Aftermath” section contains information regarding the search for the filmmakers, interviews with Heather’s mother, and even a fabricated, yet realistic-looking news report on the disappearance. Those exploring the website can even read excerpts from Heather’s journal, “discovered buried beneath a 100-year old cabin in the woods.” 80

What is likely most interesting to legend-trippers, however, is the “Mythology” section of the site, which not only presents a timeline of events regarding the Blair Witch’s activity in the late 1700s, but also photographs of the sites relevant to the legend. It even contains a photo of the only known extant copy of “The Blair Witch Cult,” a book the website claims was “on display at the Maryland Historical Museum in Baltimore in 1991. It has since been returned to a private collection.” 81 Of course, all of the information is completely fabricated by the filmmakers/screenwriters (Myrick and Sánchez) for the sake of the film’s documentary/found-footage aesthetic and verisimilitude. However, the effect that such a website achieves is similar to what one would want to achieve by telling a good scary story; some specific information is needed in order to support the tale, whether or not the person telling the story believes in it. The supplemental material on the Blair Witch website is a working substitution for the evidence one’s friend or peer would utilize when attempting to tell a convincing ghost story or coax someone to go legend-tripping.

79 http://www.blairwitch.com/filmmakers.html
80 http://www.blairwitch.com/legacy.html
81 http://www.blairwitch.com/mythology.html
Another function the website serves is to provide the person navigating it with a sense of agency. 82 While one may not visit Burkittsville in person, they can still engage in some exploration using the ‘evidence’ provided for them. Through this agency, according to J.P. Telotee, “We determine precisely how much we want to be ‘creeped out’ by the materials made available to us. And in that ‘creeped out’ effect, we glimpse both the site’s limited version of ‘transformation,’ as well as its key difference from the film itself.” 83

The film serves as yet another piece of ‘evidence’ to entice and scare the viewer, who is

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82 J.P. Telotee, “The Blair Witch Project Project: Film and the Internet,” *Film Quarterly* 54.3 (Spring 2001).
watching a legend-trip unfold. It is the website acting in congruity with the other materials that actually blurs the line between fiction and reality for the audience. This confusion was so intense upon the film’s release that inhabitants of Burkittsville began regularly to encounter legend-trippers or people who had seen The Blair Witch Project and subsequently decided to form search parties in pursuit of the missing filmmakers or the witch herself.\(^{84}\) Thus the perceived realness of the film, despite the implied horrific fate that the characters/actors meet at the conclusion, compelled people to embark on their own trips in order to interact with the legend beyond the context that the filmmakers and marketers created.

One question that arises is: if the legend on which the film is based is fake, as in, created by the filmmakers and not growing organically from the residents of Burkittsville, Maryland, does that mean that the legend-tripping experiences and personal investment that audience members made in the legend of the Blair Witch are somehow false or less authentic as a result? Does it matter? On one hand, even though The Blair Witch Project was a low-budget, independent film, it still became a tremendous commercial success. The film, along with the Blair Witch legend, was made with a paying audience in mind. The way in which the story and website ‘evidence’ and materials were presented was very intentional and carefully constructed to strike a chord with those who encountered it. In this sense, one may be more inclined to place it in a category such as ghost tourism, in which the audience member is an active participant, but one whose agency is actually very much controlled and manipulated. In addition, the Blair Witch ‘legend’ is not a part

\(^{84}\) Margrit Schreier, “‘Please Help Me; All I Want to Know Is: Is It Real or Not?’: Hoe Recipients View the Reality Status of The Blair Witch Project,” Poetics Today 25.2 (Summer 2004): 306.
of any regional folklore other than referencing a long-standing American fascination with witches; the story did not arise from the historical and cultural life of Burkittsville, Maryland.

What *The Blair Witch Project* does accomplish is to capture the transformative nature of legend-tripping better than most media or cultural products. Even in the most memorable legend-tripping experiences, supernatural fears are typically never confirmed in any major way. What is more important and more impressive is the legend’s ability to reinforce skepticism, the thought of “What if it is true?” This is something the film does quite well. Through temporary transformation and the suspension of disbelief, a transgression, however brief, is made into a space that is unusual and untrustworthy. According to film scholar J.P. Telotee, this transformation is articulated in the film’s final scene, in which the characters finally reach the haunted house, the classic legend-tripping site. He writes, “Finally, the climactic scene, in which Mike and Heather enter the ruined old house in the woods, recalls and mocks those initial domestic images of Heather’s and Mike’s homes with their implications of safety and security. We are simply left immersed in a world that has been completely transformed, one Josh had earlier, and quite accurately, summed up as ‘fucking crazy shit.’”

Telotee also notes that the goal of the website, or its ‘project,’ is to help the film transcend its status as an entertainment product and bring it into a more *real* conversation with its audience members. It aims “to blur such common discrimination, to suggest, in effect, that this particular film is as much a part of everyday life as the

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Internet, that it extends the sort of unfettered knowledge access that the Internet seems to offer, and that its pleasures, in fact, closely resemble those of the electronic medium with which its core audience is so familiar.”  

However this idea does not only apply to The Blair Witch Project website; it extends to an entire community of people who have been sharing their stories of paranormal encounters and legend-tripping experiences online for almost twenty years. The Internet is bringing about tremendous change in how individuals circulate legends and scary stories as well as how they understand legend-tripping.

Taking Legend-Tripping Online

In 1989, New Jersey residents Mark Moran and Mark Sceurman began distributing a newsletter to friends titled Weird NJ. The pamphlet documented ghost stories and local legends of the Garden State, and quickly attracted a larger community of readers looking to contribute their own tales. The fanzine grew into a popular biannual magazine, covering haunted sites in the New Jersey/larger North Eastern United States area, as well as publishing personal ghost stories and legend-tripping tips from readers. For many of the stories covered in the magazine, it was the first time such urban legends and local lore saw print. Readers were also encouraged to (carefully and legally) visit and explore the

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86 Telotee, “The Blair Witch Project Project,” 35
locations and post their own adventures and photos to the magazine’s website: what is now called *Weird US*. ⁸⁷

While the publication does not frequently use the term ‘legend-tripping’ to describe such journeys, the writers articulate the particular feelings and desires inherent in legend-tripping experiences, especially during adolescence. In an interview conducted for the “Who Are We?” section of the *Weird NJ* website, Sceurman refers to being fascinated with not only local history, but specifically the ‘underside of history,’ while Moran claims, “Some of my most vivid recollections from childhood are the feelings that I would get while exploring someplace where I knew I was not supposed to be. Abandoned places have always held a certain fascination for me, and possess a kind of mystery that becomes tangible the moment that you enter them. Trying to unravel the hidden (or forgotten) history behind such places can be a real thrill.” ⁸⁸

Now, websites that collect shared ghost stories and local legends have become the prime means through which adolescents (and adults as well) discover or reinforce knowledge of local lore, as well as prepare for legend-trips. In his interview on Bunny Man Bridge, Subject 3 mentioned the importance of the Internet for learning about the location in the first place and about the various (sometimes conflicting) threads that made up the overall legend:

How I developed my idea of this urban myth: It came from multiple sources, and I think a lot of them were contradictory, but some of them came from these community forums of teenagers on the Internet. I think there’s this big one called

⁸⁷ www.weirdus.com
⁸⁸ http://www.weirdus.com/top_links/what_is_wus/index.php
“Forgotten New York” that sort of started the craze of finding these unique places, and doing this kind of organic local history...Initially when we were looking for places to scrump, my brother would go through these forums and find the ones that were mentioned the most, and Bunny Man Bridge was kind of the spot in Woodbridge. So initially, all of the knowledge of the Bunny Man came from the Internet. In Robert’s case, he and his brother used such forums for discovering legend-tripping sites in their own region (“Fairfax Underground” is a good source for Northern Virginia/Bunny Man information), but the Internet is quickly making a region’s local history and folklore accessible to any interested party with the click of a button. Unfortunately, at this point in time it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell if this is having an effect on the legends themselves and how they are circulated among local youth.

Similar to the way in which The Blair Witch Project raises questions of legend authenticity, the Internet potentially poses some theoretical problems for local folklore. Are those contributing stories to legend-tripping forums on the Internet doing positive work in regard to local history? Possibly, because if one’s goal is to reveal the ‘underside’ of local history, as Mark Sceurman puts it, then presenting such stories to a larger audience is ideal. In the case of the Willowbrook School on Staten Island, it is beneficial that the stories are circulated, because knowledge that blemishes a city’s public, historical legacy can be quickly forgotten if it were not for adolescents and legend-trippers keeping the stories alive. Bringing such stories to a wider audience may prompt people outside of

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89 Term coined by the interview subject and his brother to describe their legend-tripping activities.
90 personal interview with the author, February 12, 2012.
Staten Island to examine their own local history with a critical eye. However, is that folklore’s concern? Should anyone and everyone have access to regional legends and folklore in the sense that they feel entitled to perform them, no matter what region they actually live in? Is sharing ghost stories on the Internet even legend performance at all?

These are questions I would like to raise for the reader and that I hope to explore further in future research. At the moment, what I can see happening is a new level of self-awareness and agency regarding legend-tripping which is beginning to surface because of the Internet. Web forums are connecting people from all over the country who are genuinely interested in consuming as much information as possible on local haunts and legends. People swap stories about their own legend-tripping experiences, share tips on the safest ways to visit such sites, and sometimes even organize trips with other people in the area. So those who did not have the opportunity of growing up with friends who participated in such activities still have a chance to experience legend-tripping with others that are just as interested. Another result of Web activity is a popularization of the term ‘legend-tripping,’ with adolescents and adults proudly claiming the label for themselves.

With the Internet, we see legend-tripping moving in a new direction for both adolescents and adults who are rediscovering and examining their teenage obsession with folklore exploration with a new mindset and language with which to describe it. Even though media attention given to legend-tripping, or related activities like ‘ghost-hunting’ may be increasing, the organic way in which local legends grow and circulate among American youth will not simply disappear. People have always been enchanted by
mysterious or even forbidden spaces, especially if such spaces carry cultural and historical meanings that are relevant to them. They will only continue to be shaped by their connections to such spaces.
In fall of 2011, I visited the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden in Staten Island with my father and my cousins. After exploring the grounds of the former sailor retirement grounds, we wandered across the street and down to the waters of the Kill Van Kull on the North Shore of the Island. We followed a dirt path along the water and discovered a few strange structures. The first was a set of railroad tracks that ran off the road and down into the water. The second was an old steel barrel with the words “FREDI AQUADILLA HORTENCIA” and strange small markings painted on its side.

[ Personal photograph taken by the author, October 22, 2011 ]

[ Personal photograph taken by the author, October 22, 2011 ]
Finally, we came to the most unsettling sight of all, a headstone constructed out of metal nailed into a square piece of slate. The rusted, imperfect letters on attached to the front of the metal sheet said, “RIP KARL REINA 5/14/11.” We were immediately uncomfortable and silent. We did not assume that it was an actual burial site, but the unexpected discovery of such a marker at the end of a windy dirt road, coupled with the unique, hand-made quality of the headstone was surely unusual, even in the light of dusk.

Upon arriving home, I examined the photographs I took that day and looked up the name on the headstone. I learned that Karl Reina was a local teenager who died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound less than a year before in the spot in which I stood. According to the Staten Island newspaper, “he was found near an outcropping of rocks and what appeared to be the remnants of a wooden pier – a secluded area where one neighborhood resident said people often come to read, or fish.” 91 I still have no idea who is responsible for the headstone, whether it was Reina’s family members or friends or neighbors, making it only more mysterious. It is the mystery inherent in such an unusual, ambiguous monument, coupled with its hidden, unexpected location that that gives it so much power and potential as a future legend-tripping site. I did not hear about Karl Reina before stumbling upon the headstone, but such a discomforting discovery prompted me to learn more and gain more respect for the place and the story.

Ultimately, what I hope to convey through my research is that while we are not always actively or consciously 'legend-tripping', we are in constant conversation with our surroundings and the history of our environment. The stories and meanings behind such places are not static or absolute. For an individual visiting a site that they either heard about from a friend or read about on the Internet, the legend is just as important as the recorded history that many deem more legitimate. In such spaces that already exist on the margins of society, either through active public attempts at erasure or simply by being forgotten, the legend can be the only truth. With this in mind, perhaps we can begin to approach legend-tripping with a more perceptive mind and an understanding that ostensive and performative activities like legend-tripping allow people to engage with history (perhaps just not the kind of history that is privileged in modern cultural memory) in a unique way.


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