

Witches, Ghosts, and Pesky High-Schoolers; Polishing Legend

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06/25/2020

Witches, Ghosts, and Pesky High Schoolers; Polishing Up Your Legend Detector, with Dr. Jeannie Thomas

Have you ever wondered what the difference is between and myth and legend? Just ask a folklorist! Myth can be defined as a sacred cultural narrative – think the greek gods, or even the bible stories. They're often used to explain big questions cultures have, trying to explain the big mysteries of their cultures.

Legends on the other hand, more likely to be believed, or at least believable. Sometimes they are based on a traceable fact. Many folklorists study legends to learn about the communities they come from, to learn what they think are important, what they fear, and find patterns in the stories. Legends often spring from the unexplained and often have ties to particular parts of the landscape of the community, stemming from a of truth or memory that doesn't always end up being correct.

All communities have their legends – from big cities to farming communities. there are plenty scattered around Utah, and Logan has plenty of its own, including the Weeping Woman in the Logan Cemetery, and the Nunnery up Logan Canyon. The Nunnery – also known as St. Anne's Retreat – is an infamous legend-tripping site with stories that have influenced reality. It consists of a group of cabins built by the Hatch family before being given to the catholic church. This is when the rumors started. Stories circulated about nuns and drowned babies, even escalating to the story of witch Hecate. The catholic church were outsiders for the majority-Mormon communities, and these stories were born out of that tension.

We're living in a time where lots of legends and conspiracy theories are floating around. These stories are often exasperated by communities under stress – much like

we are currently with COVID-19. This has happened throughout history, one of the infamous cases being the Salem witch trials. The communities in and around Salem were already under stress because of a recent smallpox outbreak, conflict with the native people, and political battles (do some of these sound familiar?). While other places nearby had their own witch trials, Salem experienced a huge number of accusations ins a short period of time, enabled by the political leaders until laws were put into place, stopping practices like spectral evidence. All of these elements contributed to the legends and conspiracy theories that circulated.

We see these kinds of events in many stressed cultures. Not only are we experiencing a worldwide pandemic, but also an economic crisis. This becomes a breeding ground for legends – like ones that say Microsoft founder Bill Gates is responsible for the outbreak. Though it may seem like legends are separate from the people who create them, often they can say a lot about us as communities – the things we value and the things we fear. Influences can range from landscapes to people, and can affect everything from place names to community attitudes. To learn more about legends, the Salem Witch Trials, and where to legend-trip around the state, listen to the latest episode of Instead!

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Jeannie Thomas is a folklorist and head of the USU Department of English. She runs the Digital Folklore Project, which tracks yearly digital trends (such as urban legends, memes, and hashtags) and how they grow and change – with Dr. Lynn McNeill. Her publications include Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, and Other Forms of Visible Gender and Featherless Chickens, Laughing Women, and Serious Stories. Her research interests include gender, urban legends, the supernatural, and material culture.



