A group of teenagers gather round an unusual statue in a graveyard, telling tales of how the strange monument came to be. A town resident shows visitors an old cave, entertaining them with an anecdote about how it got its name. The stories they tell, passed on from person to person, independent of mass media, schools, or churches, are the stuff of folklore. This oral tradition, often dismissed as outdated nonsense, is a mirror of our cultural values. Like anywhere else, Minnesota is rich in folklore.

Everyone knows and passes on folk tales, whether they are urban or rural, professional or blue collar, old or young, although different stories become relevant at different times in our lives. This article examines a number of tales about places in Minnesota, tales that are current across the state. My purpose is not to mine the history books for stories that have died out, but rather to find those that people still tell.

All the tales quoted here come direct from the source. They are stories that college students have collected from each other, and from their friends and families, over several years of folklore courses at the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

**Stories of the Unusual**

Minnesota, like any region, has hundreds of current legends tied to specific locations. Unusual houses, cemeteries, and lonely bridges are the kinds of places around which folk tales develop. At the heart of many local legends is an attempt to explain the unusual—something that does not quite belong or differs from the things around it.

Cemeteries are full of grave markers, yet only one or two are likely to have stories attached to them. In New Ulm, in a cemetery rich with interesting markers, one stands out. It is a statue of a boy dressed in a formal suit, standing casually, one leg crossed over the other. To look at the statue is to inevitably wonder, Who was he? How did he die? Why is this grave marker so personal and touching? In the absence of clear historical information, our impulse is often to fill in the blanks.

A visit to the Brown County Historical Society will tell you the history of the boy, Thomas Amon Peterson, eight-year-old son of Senator and Mrs. S.D. Peterson. He was known as Allie, and that name is on his grave-marker. He died from "enlargement of the heart" in 1883, in spite of his parents' and doctors' efforts to... 

The statue of Allie standing on his grave in New Ulm has become a pilgrimage site for local youths.
save him. The historical society has a photograph, which the bereaved parents used as a model for the statue.

Local folklore tells us a different story, however:

Back in New Ulm, there’s a fenced-in statue of a boy within a cemetery. It is rumored that the boy was a straight-A student and was very proud of that fact, but killed himself one day after receiving a bad grade. It is claimed that the fenced in area surrounding the statue is haunted by his restless spirit. Anyone who enters this domain risks being cursed by some sort of failure. No one I know has actually tested this claim for obvious reasons. But everyone seems to believe it unquestioningly since they heard that someone else who knows someone that did test it is now miserable and they aren’t willing to try it themselves.

The college student who told this story described how it came up in a dorm room discussion about exams and grades, and the dire consequences of failure, and how telling it reminded her of home, and simpler times. In the Allie tale, the sad, but not uncommon, reality of a child’s early death is translated into a tragedy that helps us explore our fears associated with pressures to succeed. Folk legends, then, are not just about a place itself, but about the particular concerns of the people who tell the legends—in this case, students who worry about grades and who miss home.

Not surprisingly, the boy’s statue has become something of a pilgrimage site for local youths, who bring Allie offerings of flowers and challenge him to step down from his pedestal. It has become a site for the classic legend trip—more on this later. The unusual is not explained away randomly, but in legends that address particular concerns and fears. Like Allie, many legends explore the death of children. Our expectations tell us that young children should not die, and the folk imagination tries to cope with such reality by telling tales about it.

Near Granite Falls and Montevideo is the Swensson farm, a site that is now open for tours because of its historic interest. The Swensson farm is unusually large for its age and location, and it stands alone, with few other buildings nearby. Perhaps most significantly, it has its own little family grave plot, where a group of headstones testify to the lives and deaths of the family during the nineteenth century. Graves in the wrong place inevitably invite speculation, and in the twentieth century, graves do not belong next to a family farm. Furthermore, some of the headstones are clearly those of children; while deaths of young children were quite common in the last century, they have become progressively less so.

So once again, our imaginations fill in the blanks. Some of the stories about the Swensson farm are fairly conventional ghost tales, incorporating a murder and a haunting. The house is now open for tours, except, the story goes, for an upstairs bedroom:

Some say that a murder was committed in the bedroom. Others say the woman to whom it belonged witnessed a horrible crime and went crazy up there. She simply locked herself in and eventually starved. No one ever went in after she originally locked the door....Some nights the figure of a woman all dressed in white can be seen there and looks out over the farm.

Other versions focus on the deaths of the children. In these tales, the deaths caused their father to go mad with grief. He was especially distraught by the death of his son, and in order to be closer to the boy, he dug a tunnel from the farmhouse to the boy’s grave. He would clamber through the tunnel every night so that he could talk to his son.

We can see how in this tale, the tragedy of the real children’s deaths is dramatized, and the unusual proximity of the graves to the house is explained by an eccentric plan devised by a father driven to the point of madness by grief, as perhaps any of us might be. The tunnel becomes a symbol of the passage from life to death, which can only be traveled so far, until one’s time comes. Thus, real history is transformed into folk legends full of human drama and emotion. Even when there is almost no historic event to trigger the tale, people use stories to explore their human concerns, and to answer the question, Why is it there?

In the small town of Janesville, there is an old house on the main street whose window has invited speculation for years.

In the window, you can see the figure of a mannequin or large doll, gazing down on the town park. Why is it there? What does it mean? Folklore, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and will piece together the picture to create a full explanation.

According to a local newspaper article, no one knows for sure why the mannequin is there, only that it has been there for years. What do the townspeople say? According to one story, the couple who once lived in the house, many years ago, had a young daughter. One day, they left her in the charge of a neighbor, who allowed her to play unattended in the nearby park. Playing on the swing, she became entangled in the rope and strangled to death. Her parents placed the doll in the window of their house as a constant reminder to the neighbors of how their neglect had cost her life.

Other residents tell of how the mannequin is to remind the townsfolk of a child, sometimes described as retarded, who was abused and killed in the attic bedroom. And yet another story tells of how a woman, grief-stricken at the death of her husband, became crazy and kept the mannequin in the window, thinking it was him.

We can see how in this tale, the total absence of historic evidence results in a freedom to create reality. But people have not created just any story. In all the versions of the folk legend, people have picked up on emotionally-charged motifs that are explored in the narrative. Once again, there is the theme of a young child who died an untimely death in a tragic way. The stories warn us about either leaving a precious child unattended, or standing by while a child is abused. The doll stands as a witness to the horrors that might befall our own children. And

Center for Community and Regional Research

This study of folk legends in Minnesota originated in the Center for Community and Regional Research (CCRR) on the Duluth campus of the University of Minnesota. The center encourages and supports social, scientific, and humanities research in northeastern Minnesota. CCRR projects link faculty and students with community agencies on research projects of local and regional significance. Projects provide an opportunity for UMD students to become actively involved in their community while learning specific research skills and general principles of planning and evaluation. Students work closely with faculty members who are ultimately responsible for the success of the project. Major student involvement is essential for project funding.

Project proposals come from UMD faculty. Many have been working with community organizations and see CCRR as a way to tackle important problems. The director and staff of the center encourage these relationships and often direct an inspired professor toward an appropriate agency (or vice versa). Base funding for the center is provided by CURA. CCRR and the community agencies involved in each project normally share project costs equally.
even as local people agree that they do not know the real truth of the story, many believe that there is a truth, and it will be revealed when a time capsule, buried in the park during bicentennial celebrations in 1976, is eventually opened. This adds an extra twist to the mystery.

Legend Trips

Many local legends live on not only in the telling, but in activities that surround the site—activities known to folklorists as legend trips. These local legend sites are not dead, but are believed, with varying degrees of seriousness, to still house the spirits of the unfortunate individuals whose stories are now told.

Allie is said to come down from his pedestal on moonlit nights, to scare people. If you kiss him you risk death. The legend trip has two dimensions: the telling of the tale, followed or accompanied by a visit to the site, and certain tests of bravery. The trip may be a simple, brief visit during which stories are told and fears raised. Or it may be more elaborate, with almost ritualistic activity involving illicit alcohol or drug use, occasional sexual experimentation, and vandalism.

Legend trips are, for teenagers, one of the few activities that are far outside adult control. The youths themselves set the terms. They determinedly set out to terrify themselves and test the boundaries of adult rationality. Legend trippers are usually between ages fifteen and twenty, from around legal driving age to legal drinking age. The car offers the freedom to roam their communities with their own rules and in the face of the authorities. Haunted sites are often difficult to find in the dark. Participants rely on vague directions given from memory, which increases the excitement of the car ride. Once there, they frequently mark out the boundaries of the site with graffiti and decoration, delineating it as their territory, set apart from normal reality.

The potent combination of drugs, alcohol, and fear—induced by the legend—offers a way to escape from the adult world. As folklorist Carl Lindahl writes, "At the center of the classic legend is the overlapping of two worlds, an intersection of the everyday and the supernatural." The legend trip takes the teenager away to a different reality, where everyday rules do not apply. The teen who pushes the limit by tripping the furthest, and getting the closest to the supernatural, gains status within the group. Evidence of this can be found at the sites themselves. Legend trippers have defaced and even removed tombstones, marking their progress with damage and graffiti, all apparently, as a show of bravado in the face of the unknown.

A location in Stillwater, known as the High Bridge, illustrates the continuing power of the local legend. It is an impressive structure that spans the St. Croix river, 185 feet above the water, secluded from watchful eyes. A local history tells that the bridge was built in 1910 and 1911, and is half a mile long, supported by six piers. It was "a major engineering feat of its time." It is dizzyingly high, with guard rails only along one side. To reach it one must go down a dark and infre-
The High Bridge in Stillwater has become the site of legend trips for local teenagers.

The story goes on to say that the night watchman’s ghost walks across the bridge on the midsummer anniversary of his death. The ghost apparently carries a green lantern to light the way on his eternal trip across the bridge. Those unfortunate individuals who see this green light apparently end up dead the day after seeing it.

In another version the daughter of the night watchman is the central figure:

The story goes that around the turn of the century, Soo Line finished a bridge about six miles north of Stillwater. A family lived next to the bridge. The father told the young daughter to stay away from the bridge because she might get hurt. One day near dusk the little girl’s dog ran across the bridge so she grabbed a lantern and went to look for it. She saw a train coming and she tried to get back. When the father came home the girl hadn’t come back yet so the father went looking for her and found the lantern on the bridge. He didn’t know if she was dead or lost in the forest because he couldn’t find her body. He looked for her every night with that lantern until he passed away. It is said that if you go there on certain nights you can see the lantern going across the bridge.

In this version the grief caused by the child’s untimely death is the backdrop for the haunting. A third version was told by a man, now in his late twenties, who had heard the story first from his father. This suggests that the legend has been around for some time.

About one hundred years ago a boy and some of his friends went to the High Bridge and got really drunk. They dared each other to go across the bridge. They went across the bridge and while they were crossing back over one of the boys lost his balance and fell off the bridge into the water. It is said he died instantly and washed away down the river. So the boys all go home and get the father of the boy who fell in. The father goes back up to the High Bridge with a blue lantern and looks for the boy, but he can’t find him, so the father decides to commit suicide because he is upset about his son and jumps off the bridge. After this happened the area was blocked off and now no trespassing signs cover the area. Many people still continue to go up there just to park, drink, and try and cross the bridge. These people say they have seen the shadow of the father walking across the bridge with his blue lantern calling out for the boy. Others just look for the blue light or listen for the father.

This story seeks to account not only for the blue light, and the mysterious bridge, but also for the fact that authorities do try to restrict access to the site, which is posted no trespassing, apparently with the main purpose of keeping visitors away.

From all these variants, we can see how people constantly generate new

The High Bridge, as local teens dubbed it, was supposedly built around the turn of the century. During World War I it was presumably used in transporting ammunition from the Twin Cities to out east somewhere. In case of sabotage (from whom I was never told) the railroad company that owned the bridge had a night watchman hired on with the task of keeping the bridge secure. During a dark and rainy night in the middle of summer, the night watchman started his hourly inspection of the bridge. Upon reaching the middle of the span [between Minnesota and Wisconsin] he happened to get caught on the bridge while an ammunition train was crossing. In the ensuing ruckus that the train and the high winds made, the night watchman fell from the bridge to his death.

The High Bridge is a forbidding enough site on its own merits, but according to local teenagers, it is also haunted, having been the site of a terrible tragedy many years ago. Details vary, showing clearly the way oral tradition works on a core story over the years, adding and deleting new details. Most versions hinge on the appearance of a blue or green light, which, on dark nights, is said to move across the bridge. Usually, the story involves the fate of a night watchman or his young child.

The frequently traveled road, posted no trespassing, park, and hike off the road a distance.

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spins on a story whose core remains the moving light. We can also see that the stories live on in the activities of teenage legend trippers. Visiting a haunted site is an emotionally charged event, making the air electric with anticipation and fright. Even the doubters in the group will experience an adrenaline rush. As one participant put it, “I really didn’t believe in ghosts or anything, but when we got there I sure was scared.”

The High Bridge, like most legend sites, shows the signs of its ritualistic uses, with sections near the end of the bridge marked out by graffiti. The excitement of the ritual generates the bravado that leads teens to venture out along the railroad tracks, looking through the slats at the St. Croix River, almost 200 feet below their feet. Fortunately, perhaps, it also generates a fear of the supernatural that prevents all but the most foolhardy from going too far.

The Stillwater legends themselves interact with the energy of the moment, dramatizing many of the concerns that the teenagers are dealing with in their own lives. In one tale, the child did not listen to her father, and this caused her death. Legend trippers are just at the age where they are testing authority and parental boundaries; the trip itself is part of that testing. Thus the legend offers a challenge, which the youngsters act out. In another version the connection is even clearer—the boy who died was drinking, just like the present day legend trippers, and his father’s suicide was the result.

While legend trips dare teenagers to act against the adult world, they also provide an outlet for confronting their anxieties about death, a topic that adolescents are beginning to worry about. Adolescence is a time of many changes, both emotionally and physically, and these changes carry with them conflict and anxiety. Parents still try to exert their authority, and the teenager, while still needing that security, is trying to become independent. Legend trips are part of that growing need for independence, and for confronting danger and the reality of death.

It seems that almost every Minnesota community has its special, haunted site that allows youngsters to explore their fears and their independence. Genoa has the Devil’s Kitchen, an old, burned-out house where supposedly a baby died in the fire that destroyed the house. Trenton has a graveyard where lie the victims of a crazy axeman who wiped out the town “one cold November evening in the 1890s.” In Saint Cloud’s Calvary Cemetery is the Black Angel, a granite marker to a cruel man who murdered some children, “If you touch the angel you will awaken the spirit of the man and you have one minute to get out of the cemetery or something very bad will happen to you.”

In Duluth, teenagers recklessly court danger by jumping into the Lester River from a high railway bridge. Before trying it, they may tell tales of a high school student named Trod: “He went to East [High School] back in the seventies or sixties and was know for his gutsy jumps.” One day, perhaps broken-hearted when his girlfriend dumped him, he tried a double back flip. “He never came up for air after he hit, and people got spooked out. When the cops finally got to the scene, they could find no trace or remains of a body. The story goes that if you go there at night, sometimes you can catch the ghost of Trod haunting the water below.”

Haunted places and horror tales clearly function for teenagers as a way for them to assert their identity, differentiating themselves from adults and from other groups of adolescents. Knowledge of and participation in a legend visit may mark out students from one high school or community as distinct from another, or perhaps simply demonstrate which kids are cool or brave.

Ghosts and murderers, heroes and villains—these are just a few of the wealth of Minnesota legends that still flourish all around us. Folklorists have debated for years whether people really believe these stories of ancient origins and supernatural happenings. Most likely they do not, at least in the literal way they may believe the stories of the history books. Yet people continue to create and recreate these folk spins on the past. The meaning of folklore transcends the issue of literal truth—folk history is symbolic history. It is a tapestry of the fantastic, the might-have-beens, and the what-ifs, and the stories come truly alive only at the local site where they are told. Through folk legends, people are exploring their own community—their awareness of its past and the values it supports or rejects—and they are asserting their own sense of belonging in that community.