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IT MAKES SENSE TO US

Cultural Identity in
Local Legends of Place

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In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the role of narrative in constructing culture, deriving from scholarship in anthropology, geography, folklore, and communication studies. In this article, the author uses popular folk legends, collected in one state, to bring together some of this interdisciplinary scholarship on the central role of narrative in everyday life. In particular, the author focuses on how these shared narratives serve culturally to construct a sense of place and, with that, a sense of cultural identity that includes some people while excluding others.

INTRODUCTION: THE STORIES

We begin with a place. It is not a city, or even a home, but a bridge. Not all bridges are really “places,” but this one has a name, the “High Bridge,” and it has a story. And as Frake (1996) suggested, “Places come into being out of spaces by being named” (p. 235). This bridge, on the outskirts of Stillwater, Minnesota, crosses the St. Croix River, between Minnesota and Wisconsin. Everyone in Stillwater knows the High Bridge, and most can tell you a story. These are three of them:

Well, it was built at the height of Stillwater’s glory days—when more logs came through here than any town in America. Stillwater was something back then. Still is, mind you, it’s a good place.

You know, it was designed by the architect who built the Eiffel Tower—that’s how important Stillwater was back then. Sort of out of place now, but it reminds us.

It was supposedly built around the turn of the century. During World War I it was 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

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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 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 his 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.

For each of these local people, the High Bridge has a story, a narrative that brings this place to life and that gives identity both to the place itself and to the people who tell the tale. In this article, I explore stories like these—narratives of place that are shared among people about specific geographical locations. My central purpose is not description *per se* but interpretation. What is the role of cultural narratives in helping people define and culturally construct place? And how does this construction of place contribute to a sense of cultural identity?

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

Narrative has become the focus of much interdisciplinary attention—the study of personal narratives has come to the forefront in interpersonal communication, oral history has enjoyed a renaissance, and the life history has long been an important component of ethnographic research. Local legends and traditions have tended to be the province of the folklorist, whose strengths have been in collecting and classifying narratives or in analyzing the history and meaning of individual local legends, largely from a social psychological or performance perspective. Meanwhile, cultural geographers have turned their attention in recent years to the ways in which place is culturally constructed through human interaction, work led by Harvey (e.g., 1989). The resurgence of interdisciplinary interest in narrative is summarized concisely by Somers (1997): “These new views posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and through which we constitute our social identities” (p. 83). Thus, we might examine narratives of every kind, from personal experience stories to the stories created by ethnographers or historians, using these stories to understand how individuals and groups of people construct reality. This is not to say that all types of narratives help us understand the same things—“official” historical narratives will give insights

different from family tales—but all narratives depend on “selective appropriation” of facts, incidents, descriptions, and so on to create particular kinds of cultural constructions.

My intention here is to use some of the traditional narratives of one state, Minnesota, to attempt an interpretation of what often seem outlandish and fanciful stories and to locate them in both spatial and cultural context. As an anthropologist and folklorist, I am less interested in personal narratives than I am in shared narratives—tales that are known by people who share some kind of cultural marker in common, be it geographical location, age, ethnicity, or a combination of these (Stevens 1990). As Bruner (1984) wrote, stories bear the imprint of the individual yet are important windows into the shared world views of any culture or subculture: “We know that stories must be seen as rooted in society and as experienced and performed by individuals in cultural settings” (p. 3). And rather than focus on the analysis of the many variants and meanings of one narrative, as is common in folklore studies, I want to use a variety of different tales to draw broader conclusions about this popular cultural sense of place. It is certainly true that “sense of place” is a complex phenomenon that does not derive only from these very informal tales, and I do not wish to risk privileging their importance over other kinds of narratives. Furthermore, in analyzing narratives of any kind, one runs the risk of claiming a single, “real” meaning to them.

With these limitations in mind, I do believe that as Dundes (1989) claimed, informal folk stories, which depend on popular interest to survive and change, are an especially interesting route into cultural meaning. As Georges and Owen Jones (1995) and others have said, people do not fill their heads or entertain their friends with meaningless rubbish but tend to retain and pass on texts that have some “meaning” to them. The meaning of those texts shifts constantly according to the context and the audience (Toelken 1986), and so I do not presume to pronounce “the” meaning of the tales. Rather, I offer some suggestions as to the cultural themes that are explored in stories that have an impressive durability yet are often overlooked as mere trifles. Essentially, I argue that local legends are one type of what Somers (1997) called “ontological narratives”; they “are the stories that social actors use to make sense of . . . their lives. . . . Locating ourselves in narratives endows us with identities, however multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral or conflicting they may be” (p. 84).

WHAT IS A CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF PLACE?

As Featherstone (1993) put it, “The drawing of a boundary around a particular space is a relational act which depends upon the figuration of significant other localities within which one seeks to situate it” (p. 176). Through our tales about place, we mark out spatial boundaries, which may extend over a whole town or just over a particular space—a bridge, a hill, a lake. The tale confirms that this piece of space actually means something, and it may also tell us who belongs in that space and who does not. Place, as David Harvey (1993) reminded us, is both a physical reality and a social construct.

Anthropologists are very familiar with the role of cultural narratives in defining place in many non-Western societies. For instance, Basso’s (1984) work with the Apache shows how the physical landscape in which the Apache live is also a social landscape constructed through generations of moral stories: “Such locations, charged as they are with personal and social significance, work in important ways to shape the images that Apaches have—or should have—of themselves” (p. 45). Knowledge of the correct place names and the tales that go with specific locations is crucial to a sense of Apache community and belonging—when knowledge starts to wane, the Apache see this as a cultural crisis that is characterized as “losing the land.” Native American writers such as Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko clearly articulate the role of place in traditional narratives; indeed, Silko (1994) argued that “location, or ‘place,’ nearly always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives. Indeed, stories are most frequently recalled as people are passing by a specific geographical feature or the exact place where a story takes place” (p. 252).

Contemporary Euro-American society is less focused on the natural landscape than are traditional American Indian cultures. Nevertheless, we too are possessed by the need to turn spatial features into something that has meaning through narrative (Neumann 1999). We re-create place through historic reconstructions; we tell stories to locate us where we feel we should be. And in communities across America, we have local cultural narratives that we can bring out and share, and make a point with, when the opportunity or need arises. That is what these stories are. Minnesota, like any region, has hundreds of current legends. Many of them are regional versions of national and international “urban legends,” which tell about children being abducted in malls or mad

axemen in the backs of cars (Brunvand 1981, 1993). While these are fascinating in their own right, I want to concentrate here on legends that are tied to specific Minnesota places. Even these, as we shall see, usually have much in common thematically with local legends found elsewhere but still have a distinctive Minnesota accent.

METHOD: TRACKING DOWN THE TALES

One of the problems with local narratives is that they are elusive and not at the forefront of people's minds most of the time. People remember them when asked, but then the telling can often be somewhat artificial. It is important to remember when looking at the texts that these texts rarely reflect the actual conditions under which the stories are shared. In everyday discourse, the stories emerge when the time is right. According to folklorist Nicholaisen (1984), "To the best of my knowledge . . . we do not yet have any systematic data as to what it takes to make someone tell someone else a legend and to make that someone else willing to listen to it" (pp. 172-73). The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1991) suggested one hypothetical moment in which a legend might be told: "The rancher might, for instance, sit on the porch after a hard day's work, rehearse and thereby enhance his awareness of the hill's emotional coloring by retelling its story to a visitor" (p. 688). In telling this story, the rancher essentially constructs this hill or this ranch as a place, with its own identity and its own separate existence. Depending on the nature of the tale, the narrative might also reaffirm the rancher's right to be there, or say something about his value system. Yet tales like these are unlikely to emerge unbidden in the course of an interview.

Thus, most of the stories considered in this article were collected in circumstances other than the casual conversation in which they are normally communicated, although quite often the context comes close to this. Many were initially collected by undergraduate students, as part of a field project required in an upper level folklore class. In this class, taught for many years by a colleague and then by me, students are required to describe and interpret three "items of folklore," which might be anything from home remedies, through jokes, to legends. The project is something of a miniexercise in ethnography, as the students are instructed not merely to provide the text but the context of the item—the circumstances it was transmitted, the setting, who was present, and so

on, and they are also asked to offer some interpretive thoughts on the meaning of the item. The class archive, accumulated over twenty years, contains all kinds of oral traditions, including large numbers of local legends (often in many different versions), from towns all over Minnesota. Often, students have written about how they first heard the tales themselves and are thus recalling the “natural” contexts for them. These many examples were supplemented by a summer of more systematic fieldwork, during which a research assistant and I traveled to many small towns in the state, following up on known legends and visiting sites. We spent a great deal of time in diners, bars, and other locations, where we were able to ask local people about sites and stories with which we were already familiar and occasionally learn tales we had not known before.¹

HOW LEGENDS DEVELOP

Why is it that some places seem to invite the telling of stories? Unusual houses, cemeteries, and lonely bridges are the kinds of places around which legends cluster, just as distinctive or slightly mysterious, perhaps anthropomorphic, land forms often invite narrative explanation among American Indian peoples. The High Bridge at Stillwater is a typical example—it is rather remote, it is quite spectacular, and unlike more modest structures in the area, it invites explanation. In some respects, it has become a symbol of Stillwater, and thus, perhaps, the stories are one way through which people in the town see themselves and their town, a point to which I will return. The stories that develop around the anomalous or distinctive feature are not random—the site comes to define through story the values and cultural identities with which people choose to define who they are.

So at the heart of many local legends is an attempt to explain ambiguity—something does not quite seem to belong or stands out from its surroundings (see Baker 1970; Clements 1980; Hall, Clements, and Lightfoot 1980; Hall 1980; Mullen 1972). Cemeteries are full of grave markers, and yet only one or two are likely to have stories attached to them. Those one or two will be different or distinctive in some way. In New Ulm, for example, in a cemetery rich with interesting markers, is one that 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, and why is this grave marker so personal and touching? In the absence of clear historical information, the narrative impulse is to answer these questions and 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 save him. The historical society has a photograph, which the bereaved parents used as a model for the statue. Local folklore tells us otherwise, 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. (Project 806, 1994)

This narrative points to the way symbolic reality replaces objective reality; local narratives tell us less about “history” and more about how people construct their sense of place and cultural identity. In the Allie tale, we see how the sad but not uncommon reality of a child’s early death in the nineteenth century becomes translated into a tragedy that helps students in the twentieth century explore the fears associated with pressure to succeed. Folk legends, then, are not just about the site itself but about the particular concerns of the people who tell the legends—in this case, students who worry about grades. Significantly, the student who recounted this tale explained that it came up within the context of a dorm room discussion about exams and the consequences of failure. Also significant, she added that telling the story made her think about home and her relatively pressure-free teenage days—the story in itself evoked a strong and immediate “sense of place.” Back in New Ulm itself, 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, in a classic “legend trip,” a phenomenon to which I will return.

And even when there is almost no actual historical event to trigger the tale, people still explore these human concerns, even as they answer the question, “Why is it there?” In the small town of Janesville, for instance, 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. According to the local newspaper (Child in window amuses some, scares others 1975), no one knows for sure why the mannequin is there, only that it has been there for years. What do the people say? According to one story,

there was this man who married this lady who was a little “touched.” After these people were married for about a year they had a little girl. Well, after a few years the mother started to act more insane than ever. Then when the little girl was about five years old the mother shot and killed her then killed herself. Booom. After that the husband was torn by guilt, and he went out and bought a doll that was about the size of the little girl. Then he dressed the doll in the clothes that the little girl was wearing at the time that she was killed. It still had the blood on it and everything. Anyway, he took the doll and tied a noose around its neck, and then hung it up in the attic window. You can really see it from the street. Even today, after all this time. You can look straight in that window and see it. (Project 719, 1981)

There are many other variations. One tells how the people who 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 told us that the mannequin is to remind the townsfolk of a child, sometimes described as retarded, who was abused and killed in the attic bedroom. Still 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 any historical evidence results in a freedom to create “reality.” But people have not created just any story. In the various versions of the tale, we can see people

have picked up on emotionally charged motifs that are explored in the narrative. 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 mute witness to horrors that might befall our children. At the same time, the doll has become a symbol of the whole town; the values narrated in the various versions of the tale are believed to be the values that people in a small town like Janesville should have. One resident explained, "It makes sense to us—the story is all about how people in this town look after each other, or they should, anyways." As Johnstone (1990) put it, "Shared stories are the sources of shared notions of truth and appropriateness which bind people together" (p. 127). The identification of the figure with the town and what it stands for is made even more explicit through a related narrative that was often added to the explanatory one. A time capsule about the town was buried in the park during bicentennial celebrations in 1976; many believe that when the capsule is eventually opened, the real truth about the mannequin will be revealed.

The moral dimension of the Janesville narrative is clear. Legends are "not heavily didactic, but encourage brief meditation" (Nicholaisen 1984, 176), in which the teller and listener consider for a moment the broader implications of strange or unusual places or events. Citing Hayden White, Nicholaisen (1984) pointed to the human impulse to narrate and place structure on seemingly random happenings: "So stories make reality. They show events to have structure and meaning and not simply sequence" (p. 176).

For the unusual is not merely explained away randomly but is explained in legends that have cultural salience—that deal with 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. In some cases, the tales stem from actual deaths of young people, and history becomes transformed into stories full of human drama and emotion. A tale that has mutated into many versions for years concerns a young girl who died in a small town in the late 1800s.²

Many, many years ago, there was a family named _____. I think it was in the 1800s. There was a girl named _____ who was about six years old. Rumor has it that she got sick and went into a coma and later died. Then her father buried her on the farm place under a shading tree. He built a

wall around her grave and put a cast iron gate on it (which now squeaks in the wind). A couple of days after she was buried the father had dreams that she was alive and crying out to him. After repeatedly hearing these cries he ran out and dug her grave up, opened the casket, and found the inside all scratched up like she had been trying to get out and her fingers were even all bloody from her efforts. Her dad was put in a mental institution and no one knows what happened to her mother. (Project 353, 1985)

Another version shows how details change while the core of the story remains:

Some time during the nineteenth century, at age six or seven, ___ was playing in a hay loft and accidentally fell out. She was pronounced dead and buried in a long, white dress. Shortly after burial, people began to wonder if she was actually dead or not. Curiosity got the better of them and a group of people dug up the little wooden coffin. Sure enough, there were scratch marks across the top and her fingers looked mangled! She had been buried alive and in desperation, tried to claw her way out! There was nothing the people could do now, but put her back in the ground. (Project 888, 1995)

Yet a third version explains that the girl

was playing one day in a lone tree in the middle of a corn field. . . . She slipped and fell to the ground. The fall knocked her unconscious and in a coma. Her father found her later, and being drunk at the time, thought she was dead. He built a coffin and buried her right under the lone tree. (Project 901, 1995)

This teller reports that the farmer who now owns the land has seen the ghost of the child at her grave and also includes the belief that cars will stall on the remote road where the grave is located.

In this story, we can see clearly how the legend works at different levels. First, it explains the existence of the anomalous grave, which is set apart, in a small, walled-in area, miles from the nearest towns. The dates on the headstone mark it as the grave of a child. According to historical records, there is evidence that although the girl died of natural causes, her body was moved from a cemetery to the new plot, for unknown reasons, and this may have prompted the “buried alive” motif. This motif is, of course, pervasive in folklore and popular literature, and once it

became attached to the site, the popular imagination kept it as a central part of the legend. At another level, the legend explores and warns about careless parenting. Frequently, the child is playing in dangerous situations, where she should be supervised; in one version, the father is drunk when he buries her.

I had an opportunity to look at an example of a possibly emerging narrative of place that suggested a potential role for that narrative in establishing a local sense of identity. While discussing the High Bridge in Stillwater, a woman went on to tell me about a house in the nearby hamlet of Marine St. Croix. Like Stillwater, Marine St. Croix is an old, established, but tiny river community, which has largely been bypassed by development. A focus of my conversation with this woman was the need to preserve the past and maintain the integrity of the community. She directed me to an old house that she, and other residents, believed was haunted, possibly by the spirit of its original owner. Her "story" was not fully developed but was emerging, in a series of somewhat disjointed comments. First, she pointed to the fact that the original owner of the house, a wealthy businessman, had been unhappy, with personal tragedy in his life, but had lived there for many years. "Any old house like that, you have to wonder if he hasn't left his mark." Her story then moved to the present, describing how some new owners had moved into the village, bought the house, and began modernizing it. "I heard that a lot of strange things began happening. The showers would go on and off. And the truck that was there to dig water pipes moved on its own, and messed up the lawn. Stuff like that." Her explanation was that the ghost, of whom there was no tradition previously, was annoyed that someone was trying to change the way the house had been for more than 100 years. The woman mentioned that others in the village had talked about these events. Later, I spoke with the new owners of the house. They knew its history, and some details about its original owner, which added to the house's charm, and they had heard vague rumors in the village about "hauntings." They confirmed that a few "odd" things had happened during construction but attributed these to a series of unrelated mishaps, all with a logical explanation. In other words, they did not link together the facts about the owner, their purchase of the house, and the minor accidents into any coherent narrative that meant something to them. To them, the various events in the house's past and present were simply interesting but random happenings that did not add up to a "story."

So it remains to be seen if the story will gain broad currency in the community and will “gel” as a “community” narrative. Its genesis, though, suggests something about competing discourses in the village—a traditional discourse that wishes to assert a value system of conservatism and no change versus a newer discourse that, while valuing history, wishes to improve on it, and change. We see how narratives such as this can distill a point of view, even an argument.

LEGENDS AND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

So, local tales may function to mark the teller as belonging to a particular community and believing in that community. At times, a local legend may take on an overwhelming role in the community, as, for example, have the legends of the Runestone in Alexandria. The Runestone is a piece of rock, reportedly dug up, embedded in the roots of a tree, by a Norwegian farmer in the late nineteenth century. The stone is inscribed with Norse “runes,” telling the story of how a party of Vikings who had reached Minnesota in the fourteenth century was set on and slaughtered by Indians. The Runestone Museum holds the stone, a collection of supposedly Viking implements and weapons, and a diorama, which shows blond, noble Vikings scanning the horizon, with rather caricatured Indians doing a war dance in the background. While there was fairly extensive scholarly debate about the authenticity of the stone around the turn of the century, it is unanimously accepted as a nineteenth-century hoax by the archeological profession (Feder 1998). However, for the people of Alexandria, their Viking heritage has become both a matter of pride and a source of tourist revenue; the Runestone and the various legends about its history are the tangible symbols of that pride. The city sports a banner welcoming visitors to “Viking country,” and a giant Viking statue stands in front of the museum. Replicas of the Runestone, large and small, pop up all over town. While this is one local narrative that has moved from the grassroots to the commercial realm, the legend is clearly still a vital symbol, the mention of which prompts local people to talk about their Scandinavian roots and the pride in their heritage.

This point leads to another role for the local legend. Markers of cultural identity, which serve to remind us who “we” are, may also serve to remind us who “we” are not and thus who “they” are (Dundes 1989). A

subtext of the Viking legend of Alexandria is that “we,” the civilized Scandinavians, have a right to be here, having populated the land many centuries ago. The original inhabitants of the land are conspicuously absent, except in the form of the occasional caricature. As the local sheriff told me, in mentioning the recent vandalizing of an Indian burial mound, “people around here don’t care much for Indians.”

We have all heard some of the vast range of jokes that stereotype ethnic groups, and indeed jokes are probably the major form of ethnic stereotyping in folklore. But local legends play their part too, although perhaps not as blatantly. Many legends are about places that are frightening, and frequently the sources of the fright are ghosts and supernatural entities. Sometimes they are other kinds of “aliens.” For instance, a popular local legend site near Granite Falls is the “Sanitarium,” a large, dilapidated place that once treated tuberculosis patients. The building closed in the late 1960s or 1970s and was apparently abandoned almost intact. The hospital is still full of old, broken furniture; books; newspapers; and clothing, all now destroyed and scattered. The building is marked out as a legend site with graffiti, including purportedly Satanic markings and signs. Tales abound of strange sightings, noises, and happenings, and the building is indeed a spooky place. A regular feature of the tales is that the building is or was used by “Satanists,” and significantly, these evildoers are almost always described as Mexicans, who practice vaguely defined rituals akin to Santeria or Voodoo. Other local legends describe crazy Indians who live in the woods and slaughter youths at summer camps, or gypsies who abduct children in shopping centers. For once again, local legends do not develop randomly but according to particular concerns and fears. Thus, a distrust of supposedly wild and disorderly Mexican migrant workers surfaces in narratives surrounding an apparently unconnected place—the local wild and disorderly legend site. For “local knowledge not only can empower by creating places out of official cracks, it can also disempower by exploiting those who have fallen through the cracks—people who, in the view of others, have no place at all” (Frake 1996, 248).

The disempowering meaning of local stories is best illustrated in the supposed “Indian legends,” told in Minnesota and all over the United States to explain local features or place names. Take White Bear Lake, for example:

There was a village on the shores of the lake. In the middle of the lake is Manitou Island (Manitou means spirit in Indian [*sic*]). There was this Indian brave and an Indian maiden who were attracted to one another. The Chief, who was the maiden's father, would not allow the two to marry because the brave had not yet proved himself to the tribe. The maiden took a canoe to the island. She wept. There was a big white bear on the island, and when the maiden saw the bear she let out a scream. The Indian brave heard her scream and took another canoe out to the island. He killed the polar bear with a spear. From that moment on he was regarded as a hero in the village. The couple was now allowed to marry. And that is how White Bear Lake, Minnesota, got its name. (Project 898, 1995)

Clearly, this tale is fanciful; polar bears have never been a major part of the wildlife of Minnesota! The tale is only one of many that involve Indian "maidens" and "braves," although the happy ending is unusual. More commonly, the maiden leaps to her death for love of the brave, as in a legend associated with Maiden Rock in Wisconsin. But the most striking thing about these "Indian" legends is that almost invariably, they have no provenance in the lore of American Indians themselves. They are, in other words, white cultural constructions. Minnesota is awash with Indian maidens named Blue Flower and braves named White Cloud, and tales of their doomed love. Many others claim Indian origins for place names, while poking fun at stereotypical Indian speech patterns: thus, the town of Mahtomedi is named from a convoluted "Indian" legend about a canoe mishap that culminates in the cowardly Indian boy squealing, "My toe! Me die!" (Project 701, 1993). Chequamegon Bay gets its name either from an Indian maiden (Project 300, 1981) or an annual spring ritual, both variants ending in Indians wading into the lake and, as a first sign of spring, shouting, "Come on in—She warm again!" (Project 524, 1981).

On a somewhat less burlesque note, a woman explained to me how Devil's Track Lake, on the Gunflint Trail in northern Minnesota, was named.

It was named after my great-grandfather, Sam Zimmerman. He was married, and he had a family, and he lost his leg in a trapping accident. He still had to make a living and so in the winter time he had a snowshoe for his one foot, and two small snowshoes for his two crutches. And Indians came upon his tracks, which were one large and two small one to the side, and so, Devil's Track. That's a true story. . . . Anyone up the shore

[of Lake Superior] and through Grand Marais will tell you that. The Chippewa couldn't figure it out you see, so they were scared of the place. (Telephone interview, July 18, 1995)

In this story, and others like it, we see a symbolic displacement of the Indian and thus of the Indian's right to name these places. Many other legends acknowledge the previous inhabitants of the landscape and express a profound ambivalence toward them—they still have power. Thief River Falls, in the northwest of the state, is supposedly cursed by an Indian woman who lost her son in the river—it will steal one person for every year that has passed since then (Project 624, 1992).

A woman recalls the tale she was told about why houses have fireplaces:

Deep under every house lie the spirits of the many Indians that used to inhabit Minnesota. In the winter, when it is very cold the Indian spirits wake up. If they don't see smoke signals from the chimney they get very angry because they think their relatives are dead, but if they see smoke signals, they think it is their relatives sending the signals and they sleep and are at peace again. (Project 191, 1980)

The sleeping Indian appears again in a tale about Indian Heights Park in Rochester:

On the lip of the valley, there are several places where the earth has formed its own makeshift stairway down into the valley. The one closest to my house, when you go to the right once you're on the lip is the first we came to. I was in front and I remember Heidi saying, "Hold your breath while you walk between those two stones because they're the head Indians' tombstones—you don't want to anger the Indians or their ghosts will haunt you and hurt you." I held my breath and walked down the valley. . . . I found out that the park was named Indian Heights because Indians used to live on the hill and buried their dead there before white men came to the area. . . . Even now I slow down and think about the Indians as I walk past these spots, and I probably always will. (Project 616, 1991)

Why are these "Indian" tales so popular in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States? Joel Martin (1996) offered one explanation. Martin noted that in the South, and in Alabama in particular, people "gave Indian names to most of that state's streams and almost all of the state's

rivers, some ten thousand miles of waterways” (p. 138). The same phenomenon happened in many states but always *after* the Native population had actually been removed. In other words, the Indian names were chosen by white people, much as “Indian” legends are white creations. It may be true that the names derive from genuine Native words; “Minnesota” itself derives from Native roots. Yet “Minnesota” as a state is a white construction. Martin continued,

On a symbolic level, Indian names enabled southerners to claim an archaic connection between themselves and the land. Call a town Irwinton and it might as well be in England or Connecticut. Call it Eufaula and it almost had to be in Alabama or Oklahoma, i.e., a place where Muskogee Indians had lived. An Indian name made it seem as if the new town had been there forever, as if it was okay for whites to be living there. . . . Indian names were prized possessions, signs that whites used to assert that they had inherited the land and its history. (p. 138)

Indian legends seem to serve the same purpose as Indian place names. They developed after American Indians ceased to be a significant presence in these communities, but they served to mark the community out as distinctive, as having long ties that “go back into Indian history.” Thus, communities have stories about “Indian graveyards” that border or lie under their towns, such as the “sunken graveyard” that is supposed to exist on the riverside in Faribault. Long-dead Indians are co-opted as guardians of tradition, even when that tradition is not their own. In Little Falls, they tell a story about the grave of Chief Hole in the Day:

The legend is that no tornadoes, no floods, and no earthquakes will ever hit the area unless someone disrupts the grave. In 1975, the city of Little Falls was building a highway around the town. . . . The highway was being built right by the grave, and that summer the area of central Minnesota experienced the first flood that had ever occurred. There had never been a natural disaster in this area until the construction started. (Project 915, 1995)

In another version, the year is 1972, and there is

the worst flood to have ever stricken that area. Because of the damage to the area of his grave they had to re-route the road and left the chief

undisturbed. Until this day the grave still remains undisturbed and no tragic events have happened to Little Falls and that legendary area. (Project 606, 1992)

In this story, we can clearly see the symbolism of the town's connections with an ancient tradition that is threatened when the town tries to change its identity. DeCaro (1986) suggested that an "Indian" connection tends to create an aura of authenticity around a story, making it seem more "historical." Like Martin, he also suggested that Indian legends serve to appease a lingering sense of guilt at having displaced the original inhabitants, pointing out that the places that developed these legends were those "in which the white inhabitants could indeed afford a noble savage because the Indian no longer posed a threat" (p. 77).

Indian legends often paint an ambivalent picture of American Indians, seeing them on one hand as wild, aggressive people who fight constantly among themselves and potentially threaten whites. Thus, many of the "suicide" tales are said to result from the cruelty of warring bands of Indians who refused to reconcile with each other. At the same time, they tend to laud the "noble savage," the romanticized "brave" or "maiden," who lives close to the earth and fades peacefully away in the face of white advances (see Berkhofer 1979). We can see the dual images when we look at two legends focused on the 1861 Dakota uprising in the region around New Ulm. A plaque in the basement of a local restaurant tells the story of how that building was the place where a group of women and children holed up during the fighting and that one woman was chosen to light the fuse to a barrel of gunpowder if things got really bad, thus killing them all and preventing the Dakota from taking them prisoner. Since then, dozens of families in the area have developed traditions that their ancestor was the heroine who stood ready to defy the "savages." Clearly, this legend serves to mark out "us," the whites, from "them," the wild Indians. At the same time, many local families also claim a different legendary tradition:

Some ancestors of my mother's family line lived on a hill near New Ulm. There lived an Indian family down the hill. My great-, great-, great-aunt heard that one of the Indian children was ill, so she sent a kettle of soup down to them for it was a bad winter. Later on that winter, when the Indians were uprising, they came and warned my aunt and her family and they escaped safely. (Project 338, 1981)

The details of this story vary from family to family, sometimes involving a mother who gave bread to a starving Indian who came to the door, or some similar variation. In any event, the story serves to identify the family as one who has been in the area for a long time and, furthermore, who has ties with those who were there even longer. A Stillwater story actually identifies the wise Indian as the prophet who basically foresaw his own annihilation and approved:

The story took place long before Stillwater became a town. There was a battle between two Indian tribes in the valley and the two chiefs from each side met at the top of the hill. The two chiefs then fought to their deaths. When the chief who won was about to die he supposedly proclaimed that one day this hill will be a place where people come to pray, where people come to learn, and where people come to rule. Nowadays there is a court house, three churches, and three schools built in this area of town on south hill.

As the teller pointed out, "I suppose it's told because it adds to the nostalgia and points out the unique history of our town" (Project 649, 1988).

Thus, Indian legends, created by whites, express a profoundly ambivalent view of the land's indigenous inhabitants, who nowadays compose the only significant minority presence in small-town and rural areas of Minnesota. Place by place, landmark by landmark, the native population symbolically gives up its own tales and its own right to be there. And they do so willingly, or at least they bow to the inevitability of the process by which the incoming population remakes the land for themselves, while symbolically invoking the ancient rights of the people they have displaced. As Feld and Basso (1996) wrote, anthropologists are increasingly seeing places as "sites of power struggles or about displacement as histories of annexation, absorption, and resistance. Thus, ethnography's stories of place and places are increasingly about contestation" (p. 5).

THE LEGEND TRIP

Thus, many local narratives work to define a place as a particular kind of community, with a distinct history and value system. In addition, there are hundreds of places that have come to be marked out in

narratives that define not a whole community, or an ethnicity, but a different kind of peer group. Let's return to the High Bridge in Stillwater. It is an impressive structure that spans the St. Croix river 185 feet above the river: local histories tell us that "the bridge was a major engineering feat of its time." It was built during 1910 and 1911, is half a mile long, and supported by six piers (Weatherhead 1977). The bridge is dizzyingly high, with guard rails only along one side. It is located down a dark and infrequently traveled road, which is posted "no trespassing."

To many adults in the town, it is a symbol of a past prosperity, a unique history, and a certain kind of town. For many young people, it is something else entirely—a magical, fearful place that is theirs alone. They are the ones who tell the tales of the blue light that dances along the railroad tracks. In the version cited above, a night watchman is hit by a train and haunts the site. 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. (Project 833, 1995)

In this version, the grief caused by the child's untimely death is the backdrop for the haunting. Another version:

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. (Project 831, 1995)

This story seeks to account not only for the blue light, and the mysterious bridge, but also for the fact that authorities try to restrict access to the site, which is posted “no parking,” apparently with the main purpose of keeping visitors away since there are no houses close by and very little traffic. Police frequently patrol the area, and young visitors are often ticketed or their cars towed away.

While local community legends come up randomly in conversation or at appropriate moments, the teenage tales of sites like the High Bridge are essentially ritualized. They are told on the way to or at the site, and the tales themselves are just part of a larger activity that folklorists have dubbed the “legend trip” (Bird 1994; Meley 1990). To understand these narratives of place, we need to understand the trip itself. Many local legend sites have a complex of activities associated with them, in addition to the stories of their origins. Thus, Allie, the New Ulm boy, is said to come down from his pedestal on moonlit nights to scare people. To kiss him is to risk death. The isolated grave of the girl who was “buried alive” is sought out by youngsters, who deface the gravesite and tempt her to emerge, or seek evidence that she still walks. In the heart of St. Paul, students terrify themselves by attempting to count the gravestones in a secluded cemetery.

The legend trip thus has a twofold structure—the telling of the story, followed or accompanied by the visit to the site, and the tests of bravery this usually involves. The legend trip may be a simple, short visit, during which stories are told and fears raised. It may also be a more elaborate, ritualistic activity, involving illicit alcohol or drug use, occasional sexual experimentation, and vandalism.

Without the place itself, the stories have little power. As Edmund Leach (1984) argued,

Without . . . anchoring into concrete details of the landscape, the fictional nature of stories becomes obvious. They may still have value but of quite a different kind. More generally, it is only when stories have a material reference that we ourselves can see and touch that we are prepared to suspend our faculty for disbelief. (p. 358)

Suspending disbelief is at the core of the legend trip experience, in that the aim is to mark out a magical place that is outside normal existence. Legend trip sites are physically marked out—often by graffiti. They have entrances and exits. At the gravesite of the girl who was supposedly buried alive, trippers go to experience the strange things that still happen around the grave. If you put a beer can on her grave, she will drink it by the next day; if you shut off your car engine, it refuses to restart; if you see a doll on top of her grave, the girl has been out playing (Project 888, 1994). The site is clearly magical—“the snow always melts on her grave and leaves don’t fall in the fenced-in area around her” (Project 353, 1985). A significant feature of the tales of the New Ulm boy is that the statue is described as standing in a fenced-in area, inside of which the legend trippers sit and party. In fact, there is not and never was a fence around the statue—the boundaries the tellers remember are, perhaps, purely symbolic.

The legend trip experience is something of a ritual. Quite frequently, participants explicitly call it a “rite of passage”—you must do it before you graduate from high school, you must do it to prove you are a man in the eyes of your girlfriend, or you must do it because “you can look death right in the face, and live to tell about it,” as one teller described the High Bridge experience. Indeed, descriptions of the experience evoke Victor Turner’s (1969) definition of “liminality,” in which at this one place, normal rules of reality are suspended, and participants allow themselves to believe in supernatural powers, and alternative realities, aided of course by alcohol, Ouija boards, and so on. Perhaps most important, legend trips are an activity that remains outside adult control; the terms are set by teenagers, who determinedly set out to terrify themselves and to test the boundaries of adult rationality. Legend trippers are commonly between fifteen and twenty, or from when the teen begins to drive to the time of 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, with participants relying on vague directions given from memory, which increases the excitement of the car ride.

As Lindahl (1986) wrote, “At the center of the classic legend is the overlapping of two worlds, an intersection of the everyday and the supernatural” (p. 2). The teen who pushes the limit by tripping the furthest, testing the limits and getting the closest to the supernatural, gains

status within the group. One can see evidence of this in the sites themselves. On one supposedly haunted statue, "Moving Mary" in Montevideo, the fingers are broken off and little offerings are left at the base.³ On one hand, we can see the signs of testing the ghost by vandalizing it and, on the other, appeasing it by leaving offerings, as they do for the New Ulm boy.

Visiting a haunted site is an emotionally charged event, the air electric with anticipation and fright. Even the doubters in the group will experience an adrenaline rush. As one respondent put it, "I really didn't believe in ghosts or anything, but when we got there I sure was scared" (Project 916, 1995). At the High Bridge, 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 two hundred feet below. Fortunately, perhaps, it also generates a fear of the supernatural that prevents all but the most foolhardy from going too far.

The specific 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.

It seems 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 it; Trenton has a graveyard where lie the victims of a crazy axeman who wiped out the town "one cold November evening in the 1890s" (Project 903, 1995). 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" (Project 899, 1995).

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 known for his gutsy jumps. One day, perhaps brokenhearted 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. (Project 897, 1995)

Another teller adds,

The only sign of his passing is the name written TROD in spray paint in sight of where he used to jump. Some people say when they hit the water that they can just make out a boy sitting with his hands clutched to his chest down deep on the pool's floor. A can of spray paint rests in his lap. (Project 893, 1995)

It is, perhaps, a story of both challenge and warning.

Thus, haunted places and horror tales function for teenagers as a way for them to assert their identities, differentiating themselves from adults and from other groups of adolescents. The cultural identity they are asserting is not their membership of an adult-oriented community—in fact, in many places, the magical haunted site is explicitly recognized as a way of rejecting what are perceived as deadening small-town restrictions.

CONCLUSION

Folklorists have debated for years whether people really “believe” these stories of ancient origins, ghosts, and murders (Degh and Vazsonyi 1971). 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 re-create these folk spins on the past. Although a historical event or tangible piece of evidence may provide a spark, rather than reflecting history, “legend may be characterized as a reflection of folk belief: commonly held values and beliefs in the community,” according to Tangherlini (1990, 379). That is, the significance of folk narratives 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 sites where they are told.

As Leach (1984) wrote,

It is not just that “places” serve to remind us of the stories associated with them; in certain respects, the places only exist (in the sense that they can be identified by name) *because* they have stories associated with them. But once they have acquired this story-based existence, the landscape itself acquires the power of “telling the story.” (p. 358)

These stories are ephemeral, and their “meanings” float from person to person and occasion to occasion, sometimes told “for true,” other times almost as jokes. Yet we bother to remember them, and we pass them on. Of course, some of our motivation is that the stories are simply fun—they are entertaining, spine-chilling, or even funny. Nevertheless, another dimension of our motivation seems to be that these stories constitute one small thread in the complex way we construct our cultural identities, especially as those identities are tied to places.

A young man describes his frequent drives past the “honking” tree, or “wishing” tree, on Highway 61 along the north shore of Lake Superior:

It’s the only remaining tree that was left behind by highway workers on the freeway between Duluth and Two Harbors. Many of the local people know of this tree and honk whenever they drive by it. It is said to bring luck and good fortune to those who lay the horn on as they pass by. . . . The tree was left behind by highway workers in memory of a coworker who was killed at that site while constructing the freeway. Anyone who honks is recognizing his importance, which in turn will bring them good luck by the deceased. . . . Every time I pass the tree I cannot help but honk my horn, and anyone who may be with me will then get the whole story of the tree if they don’t know it. . . . The only people that seem to honk at the site are ones from the Two Harbors area or Duluth. Anyone who is traveling through on vacation misses the whole significance of the tree, if they even notice that the tree is there at all. (Project 902, 1995)

As Featherstone (1993) put it, “It is . . . often assumed that we live in localities where the flows of information and images have obliterated the sense of collective memory and tradition in the locality to the extent that there is ‘no sense of place’ ” (p. 177). Nevertheless, although many

of our narratives are provided for us by the media, we still have the impulse to tell tales and to mark out special places. Bakhtin (1981) called such places “chronotypes”: locations where “time and space intersect and fuse” and that “stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members’ images of themselves” (p. 7). Stories, in the fleeting moments of their telling, link individuals: “Once you start hearing the stories, you are becoming a member of the community” (Lippard 1997, 50). De Certeau (1993) recognized especially the importance of local narratives in everyday life: “It is through . . . their capacity to create cellars and garrets everywhere, that local legends . . . permit exits, ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces” (p. 160).

When we look up along the north shore of Lake Superior, we see a physical place, of rocks, water, and the endless north woods. The Anishinabe created places here, summer hunting camps and safe harbors, and shaped those places through stories about who they were. The voyageurs and later settlers drove out the Indians and re-created those places, giving them new stories—of Castle Danger, Temperance River, and Grand Portage. The end of mining and logging and the rise of tourism created more cultural narratives—of “the mysterious lake” and the “most scenic drive in America.” Dotted through these physical and cultural landscapes are the small places, still marked out by words and stories—such as the wishing tree, or Devil’s Track Lake, or the spot where Bigfoot is seen (though never by tourists). As Tuan (1991) put it,

Taking language seriously shows . . . that the “quality” of place is more than just aesthetic or affectional, that it also has a *moral* dimension, which is to be expected if language is a component in the construction and maintenance of reality, for language—ordinary language—is never morally neutral. (p. 694)

Through stories, people continue to make aesthetic and moral sense of places, at the same time endowing these places with a sense of their own cultural identities.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork projects were assigned in folklore courses from the late 1970s until 1996; archives of these projects are in the author’s possession. When these texts are

used, an archive project number is given. Other narratives were collected by the author during fieldwork in the summer of 1995. If no project number or other specific identifying information is given, the narratives were collected during these trips, usually from anonymous respondents during conversations.

2. This particular gravesite has been the object of a great deal of vandalism in recent years. Legend trippers have defaced and removed the headstone, defaced the sight, and even attempted to dig up the grave; for this reason, I am not mentioning the location of the site or the family name.

3. "Moving Mary" is actually a statue of Jesus in a cemetery in Montevideo. The story goes that if a person drives up close to the statue and shines car headlights on it, the statue's arms will wave up and down. In addition, a pervasive feature of "haunted" sites is described—that cars will stall and fail to restart, causing terror among the occupants.

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