LEGENDS OF THE FALL

The mystery of Sarah, the Mansfield University ghost who won't go away

By William A. Kovalcik Jr.

Vampire Wine & Other Horrors
The Ghost of Native Bagel
Under a Spell in Bali
Cristina's Past Lives
THE GHOST OF EVERY FLOOR
Sarah Still Haunts MU Library Untold Years Later

By WILLIAM A. KOVALCZK, JR.

With tears in her eyes obscuring her vision, Sarah slowly climbed the six flights of stairs, circumnavigating "the well," a seventy-foot-deep chasm in the center of The Mansfield Normal School's North Hall, a most imposing structure, one of the largest buildings of its kind in all of northern Pennsylvania. When it was dedicated in 1874, just 25 years before, throngs of curious onlookers, patrons, and supporters marched in time to the "Mansfield Comet Band" from the train depot up the hill to the school; they listened to speakers, including the president of the "Normal," who read a letter from President U.S. Grant. North Hall, perched on a knoll, lorded ominously over the blossoming campus. Sarah, an exquisite young lady, was heading upward toward her dormitory room, but would never reach the comforts of her bed that night.

Sarah was quick with child, she had learned, and the father, a handsome but arrogant senior on his way to law school, wanted nothing to do with her upon hearing the news of her condition. In 1899, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy was nothing to be taken lightly, as it often led to a shameful branding, a permanent scarlet letter of lost virtue. Sarah could not even imagine facing her scornful mother and self-righteous father, let alone telling them what trouble she had gotten herself into. She gently hiked her floor-length skirt as she climbed up to her self-imposed judgment, her shiny hair twisted back and tied with a red bow; a tight Victorian collar around her neck like a noose. As she reached the top floor, she heard the muffled voices of the other girls giggling and laughing. They would judge her, too, and she could never return to the world of the carefree college freshman. She had no choice. Now several steps beyond despondent, she straddled the top rail, said a quiet prayer asking for forgiveness, and then flung herself into the North Hall abyss, never to return, yet never to leave.

Sarah, the North Hall ghost, continues to reside in her dying place. She is said to be a friendly little poltergeist with a mischievous sense of humor, and people have been feeling her effects and watching her play in this building for years. They call Sarah "The Ghost of Every Floor" because, as she plummeted to her death down the well, her screams echoed into the corridors as she passed each level -- 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 -- to her death at the bottom of the well. Henceforth, she is free to roam the entire expanse of this massive edifice, a liberty she exercises frequently.

This is the story -- with countless variations -- thousands of students, professors, and alumni of Mansfield University have told to entertain and frighten each other through the generations. In almost every story, she is Sarah, the North Hall ghost. As recently as 2001, a team of ghost hunters and a psychic saw the ghost and claimed to divine her true story. Every university has its ghost stories and its unifying myths, but Mansfield's ghost story is its primary myth, and a remarkably enduring one at that.

Sarah has haunted the North Hall during its incarnation as a woman's
dormitory for nearly a century. She's frightened legions of students scurrying past — or, in rare cases, through — the dilapidated North Hall of the 1970's, an eerie Gothic pile that was closed, condemned, and ready for demolition — a place that looked like it was haunted. And when a preservationist outcry saved the historic structure, and a $9 million renovation created a sparkling library and office space in 1996, Sarah, the Victorian ghost, remained, floating eerily through the clean, brightly-lit Digital Age building, still singing or sighing her tale of woe.

But despite Sarah's long endurance as the university ghost, a mystery remains, and in fact deepens with the passage of time. Who is she? Who was she in the real world? And who, or what, is she today in the spirit world? The answer might be enough to make current students heed the advice of Andrew Analog, class of 1992, who, remembering that "giant, gothic, hulking" building that "towered darkly over the campus at night," said, "The alley behind the abandoned North Hall was always a place to quicken your step."

The Many Faces of Sarah

Who was she? Depending on what you read, or who you speak to, in the late 1800's, the turn of the century, or the 1930's — a girl named Sarah either accidentally fell or intentionally jumped, and she was either singing or screaming, filled with school spirit, or distraught over a boy who had jilted her, died himself in the war, was expelled, impregnated her, or (extreme as it may seem) turned her down for a date. People have reported seeing a figure looking out of the top floor, unexplained lights, noises, or actually seeing a girl walking in a long white gown carrying a lamp or candle. Of course, there are those who believe the entire affair is a load of bunk.

The story of Sarah's death and subsequent haunting is traditionally told to the Mansfield freshman at orientation, thus inculcating the young students before they even attend one class. Some students end up with great stories to tell (see the alumni quotes on page 16), and everyone — students, faculty, and administrators — seems to have an opinion.

But Sarah is a peculiar ghost. She has been sighted numerous times, and there seems, in the minds of various parts of the building."

Ms. Kyofski does not doubt the stories of ghostly encounters in North Hall. She has been told by alumni that there is something there. One woman related a story of being pushed from behind while living on the sixth floor, but, when she turned around, no one was there. "I am not denying that there are spirits there. After all, it was a women's dorm for 100 years, with all the pain, happiness, and everything that goes along with that. I just don't think 'Sarah' is one of the spirits."

The legend of Sarah has spawned endless variations.

Stephen Bickham, retired philosophy professor, recreated the legend of Sarah on a ghost walk hosted by Hamilton-Gilson Productions in Wellsboro a few years ago. He played the part of Sarah's father, the fictional Josiah King, a ghost himself, who roams the streets telling whoever will listen about his beautiful, musically-talented daughter Sarah, enrolled in Mansfield Normal school to study music. She met a young man from Troy, but, over Christmas break, he was dejected because he had been expelled from school. She then returned to school, and shortly thereafter King received a telegram stating that there was a "problem" with his daughter. When he arrived in Mansfield, he was told that his daughter was dead, and there was an "insinuation of suicide." Ms. King knew that this wasn't true because, as a child, her daughter was a sleepwalker, and quite likely unconscious stumbled over the rail. Bickham believes the story of Sarah is a fable which grew up to explain why the well was sealed off in the 1940's, allegedly to prevent further star-crossed lover suicides, when in reality it was done to guard against a deadly fire. He has heard students say they experienced unexplained phenomena, including music coming from empty rehearsal rooms in North Hall.

The story of Sarah appears in Elizabeth Tucker's upcoming tome Haunted Halls, which is awaiting final review at the University of Mississippi Press. Tucker, a professor of English at Binghamton University, discusses the Sarah legend in Chapter 5: "Desperate Lovers." Commenting on the often-allegorical meaning these legends take on, Tucker notes, "In most versions of Continued on page 14
Continued from page 9
The other ladies screamed in terror as she descended, but she did not. Rather, she continued to sing until she made impact with the floor (Now that's a school spirit!). It is said that one can see the imprint of her body in the floor, and it moves in rhythm with the meter of the Alma Mater.

Tucker's research has revealed the "suicide" story circulates more readily among the students than the "Alma Mater" story, because "students have preferred to tell the version of the story that fits their own needs. Hearing about Sara's death, freshmen can recognize her as a 'worst case' character who dramatizes the dangers of courtship and other stressful situations that they may encounter on their college campus."

But no matter what professors and administrators say or don't say, ghosts have a way of doing what they want.

The Hauntings of Sarah

Those who have seen Sarah report a Victorian-era spirit, complete with the clothes of the day. Yet, oddly, the stories of Sarah's sightings don't seem to appear in any number until the 1950's. And most of those stories date Sarah's suicidal death to the 1930's. Many of the school's alumni from the 1950's have joined Sarah through the Pearly Gates, but the memories of the ghost remain strong among the 1960's and, especially, 1970's alums.

MU alumnus William P. Robertson authored Dark Haunted Day — More Tales of Terror (West Conshohocken, Pa.: Infinity Publishing, 2006). He tells a fictionalized version of a story told to him by an MU coed (Susan in the story) in the late 1960's, who experienced a sighting of Sarah. He wrote about the ghost sighting just as his friend told him: "... there floated a misty figure in a baggy-sleeved dress. Her abundant hair was straight on top and curly down the back of her neck. She had on high-topped shoes and dark stockings. Turning, she fixed Susan with a peaceful, dreamy smile. She opened her arms and beckoned with both hands before slowly fading from view."

Former MU English professor James Glimm, who died in 2000, was a folklore scholar, and in his book Flatlanders and Ridge Runners, Folktale From the Mountains of Pennsylvania, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), he claims that Sarah's death occurred in the 1930's "... or even farther back." His version recounts Sarah as the jilted lover who receives a note from her boyfriend denying his previously professed love. She then goes berserk and needs to be calmed by her dorm mates. She falls asleep, but wakes up in the middle of the night to commit the suicidal act.

What makes Glimm's story unique is his insistence that in 1975 Sarah was in communication with a freshman girl named Kyle. This student told Glimm she got messages from Sarah, who told her to go to the seventh floor, and then pointed out the room she used to live in. Glimm himself claimed to have seen the specter staring out a window on an upper floor.

Not everyone believes in the suicidal "plunge-down-the-well" account. According to the MU Public Relations office, some people have speculated that Sarah may be the spirit of a female graduate who was just very close to North Hall and decided to take up permanent residence there. Others think it may be a spirit who loves North Hall and just occasionally visits; both fairly benign versions. An alumnus who wants to remain anonymous — perhaps because he snuck into North Hall with his friends in the 1980's when it was closed — said he heard Sarah had a puppy in the dorm, and either the puppy fell into the stairwell, or the girl thought it had, and she fell trying to save it. When the alumnus and his friends broke in, they didn't see a ghost, but were spooked anyway: they encountered a dorm room door painted black with a ghost on it, and in the hallway an old shopping cart full of dead birds.

One of the more recent haunting stories occurred September 13, 2006, to Alex Ogeka, the outgoing Director of Development for Athletics. He was packing up his office on the fifth floor of North Hall at about 8:00 p.m., presumably alone in the building, when he opened his door to the brightly lit hallway only to see a shadow pass before him. No one was in the hallway. "It hit home," he said. "I always heard the alumni talk about Sarah."

Dennis Miller says that before North Hall re-opened in 1996, all the contents of three libraries were taken to the building, and students worked in shifts to organize and stack the books. One night, two students were putting books on the shelves, and every once in a while a book popped off the shelf. The stu-
dents, thinking another student was playing tricks, walked around the shelf, but no one was there. They checked the whole room, but they were the only ones in it. "The books continued popping off the shelf for another hour," Miller recounts. "The students felt sure it was Sarah being playful."

The Ghost Hunters Investigate

In January of 2001, twenty members of the Danville-based Central Pennsylvania Paranormal Research Association (CPPRA), the largest organization of its kind in the state, spent twenty-four hours in North Hall. It was vacant because of winter break. The team included Kevin Triscavage, the director of the association, a ghost hunter with 19 years experience, and the lead psychic, Josette Burrows—who was told nothing about the legend and who walked in cold—according to Triscavage; she immediately knew that a spirit named Sarah was present, and that she committed suicide by jumping off the top floor because of enormous shame over her pregnancy.

The team also included sound recorders, videographers, and photographers using infrared equipment, and computer operators who analyze and enhance images and sound on site. Burrows asked questions with the recorder running, and, in response to the question, "Are you ever going to leave here?" a woman's voice was heard on tape saying, "never, never, never." The photographers also obtained shots of translucent white orbs suspended in space throughout the building, including at the bottom of the infamous "well."

The most startling finding involved Triscavage himself—a serious, lucid, and believable man—who said that in all the investigations he has done, including regularly scouring houses for demons at the behest of the Anglican Church, he has never seen a spirit manifest itself until that night in North Hall. It was 2:00 a.m. Josette said to him, "Something is going to show itself." He expressed skepticism, as he sat there fingering the controls on a digital camera, when suddenly, only eight feet away, the upper half of a woman's body materialized and smiled at him. She was a pretty young woman, clothed in a high-collared white garment, her black hair drawn into a bun. Rather than take the most astounding photograph of his career, Triscavage froze in shock. Josette held her hand over her eyes and said, "I know what you're seeing, and I don't want to see it." Triscavage explained that it is not unusual for an entity to manifest less than an entire human likeness because it requires an abundance of energy to go from its usual state of invisibility to a discernable image.

Triscavage, by day an orthopedic technician at Geisinger Medical Center, opined that North Hall is haunted by multiple spirits, but Sarah is "the dominant entity." He explained that ghosts are "pack animals" who tend to congregate, although one usually has the strongest presence. The CPPRA also investigated Steedman Hall on the MU campus, but would like to return to North Hall, which according to Triscavage, "needs more follow-up."

The Skeptics

There are always those. If they are underrepresented in this story, well, hey, it's Halloween.

Larry Nesbit, the retired MU Director of Information Resources, had an office in North Hall starting in 1996, spent more time than anyone in that building during those years, and "never saw anything." He says Sarah is a "myth."

"I wish everyone would just drop it," says Joan Zuchowski, who worked in the library from 1996 to 2004. "I never had any encounters with Sarah in the building. Maybe she knows I don't believe in her."

The Saga Continues . . .

The oil lamps flickered on the ground floor of North Hall when the doors burst open, releasing a flood of young ladies staring in disbelief at the pale form of Sarah sprawled out on the floor of the well like a discarded rag doll. No one knew exactly why she had committed such an awful act, and speculation would begin immediately and continue through two centuries and beyond. She never told anyone, not her roommate, her teachers, classmates, or loved ones that she was both expecting and heartbroken when she made her final decision. They buried her body, but her spirit has stayed behind to confound the unbelievers, to spook the uninstructed, to entertain fans of haunting tales, to assist Mansfield students who are grappling with the emotional issues of adulthood, and to give everyone a glimpse into the mystery of both life and the afterlife . . .

Perhaps.
Alumni Still Haunted by Sarah

Mountain Home emailed hundreds of Mansfield alums seeking their Sarah memories. Based on the flood of replies, it’s clear she still haunts them all.

"I’m a former professor’s son, Mansfield alumnus, and former Flashlight editor-in-chief. I was about 13 or 14 years old, [and] ... was friends with ... Stuart Shaw, [the wrestling coach’s son]. We... would often venture into North Hall. In those days, [only] the bottom two floors were open and contained offices... we’d venture up the old stairwell at the end of the building and look in between the cracks of the locked doors on the abandoned floors... we’d bring my younger brother who was about 10. He’d wait on the office floor and open the doors for us when we came back down. If the doors locked behind you in the stairwells you had no other way of getting out.

“So this one occasion Stuart, myself and my brother Josh were in North Hall... Stuart and I climbed about three or four floors up and began looking through the crack between the two locked doors onto the floor... As we’re looking onto the floor an old newspaper must have gotten blown by some wind through one of the many broken windows on that floor... It scared the hell out of me and I turned tail and began running down the stairs. Stuart, just as scared by the “ghost”... began running and passed me on the stairs... my brother was supposed to be waiting to let us back in, but he wasn’t there... Well, we were scared... so we ran to the ground floor and broke the chain... and ran around to the front of the building to go back in and [found] my brother.

“... I felt like something was there... I did feel it for sure. [at] the top of the “WELL” [on] an August day, I felt a very cool chill come over me. There were other times when things would be out of place... I am not sold on the fact that she is... a bad spirit.

– Tim Griffiths (Griff), Class of 1997

“I lived in North Hall from Sept. ’68 ‘til May ’69 and we heard all of the stories about the “well”... There were practice rooms at the top of the building and many times when I was up there at night, especially if no one else was around, it did feel like someone was watching me..."

– Deb Ringer Buckman, Class of 1972

“The only women that haunted me were alive and well in North Hall...”
– Joseph A. Scanella, Class of 1960

“Sarah was a young lady who fell in love with a young man at the Normal School... and here [are] the different versions I heard...

1) He spurned her advances and she threw herself off the top of the well, falling the whole way down to the lobby and expiring.

2) She was rushing to meet him and tripped over the gown she was wearing and went down through the well.

3) In a fit of jealous rage after catching her with another man, he threw her off the well.

4) She was a music major, the piano practice rooms in those days were at the top of the well, she was practicing late, past curfew, was trying to be quiet, slipped over the railing, fell to her death.

– Duane Hyland, Class of ’92

“I always heard it happened around WWI and that she jumped because of the telegram from the War Dept. One night I... walked by NH... it was sitting vacant and just falling apart... there was a white light in the windows on the top floor where the old practice rooms were... Nothing was reflecting against the glass... it was on the inside... then after a few seconds it just disappeared...”
– Kathryn (Tilley) Prichard, Class of 1979

“... I had talked to several girls that lived in North Hall that had said they heard things at night; crying, screaming, and the like but were not sure where it came from.”
– Tom Belenski, Class of 1978

“... as a staff photographer [on the Flashlight student newspaper]... I was to do a photo shoot of the upper floors of North Hall... I had some pretty interesting experiences in those halls during the shoot... which included a second shoot because of unexplained “lights” or “energy” recorded on the film.”
– Timothy Peiffer, Class of 1984

“I was fortunate to be an undergraduate BEFORE the big renovation... I do remember one rainy night when I was coming home, alone, from a friend’s house & had to pass by North Hall. I saw what I thought was a hand-held candle moving around in there. I didn’t get close enough to look directly in. Either it was...[a] curious explorer, or Sarah was making her rounds!”
– Laurie Burbland, Class of 1989