Behind the Myth: Unearthing Campus Legends

Every university has its share of legends, myths, and folklore. The University of Illinois is no exception. Like many original land grant universities, we seem to have collected rumors and ghost stories as the campus has evolved and changed. Some of the stories are mundane, barely noteworthy, while a greater portion of those that manage to withstand the test of time and distortion of retelling tend to verge on the bizarre and outrageous. Oddly enough, through all variations and incarnations, the myths and lies are overwhelmingly better known than many of the strangest true stories the university has to offer. Perhaps the allure of such tales lies in knowing deep down they aren’t true. The absurdity makes them safe, removes the fear and uncertainty.

Ghost stories seemed a logical starting point for my research. Ghosts are always thrilling, compelling and, unlike the machete wielding Little Bo Peep in PAR, difficult to totally dispel. Why shouldn’t they maintain a firm grip on campus folklore? Most ghost stories center around the buildings of the main quad, not coincidentally some of the oldest buildings on campus. Creaky floors, abandoned hallways, and decaying tile abound, setting the scene better than most haunted houses. One need only spend an evening in the English building’s basement to understand what makes these legends plausible. The age of the buildings also provides a rich history – many, like the English Building and Davenport Hall once served purposes radically different from the ones they serve now, allowing for lenience in detail.
Traditionally, the UofI’s most famous apparitions are those of the “triad”. Little has been written about the Lincoln Hall sightings, the first location in our own little Bermuda triangle of sorts, although some sources claim the ghost of a woman can be seen peering out the top floor window late at night, casting an eerie glow onto Wright Street below. This may be related to the World Heritage Museum which was or is located on the fourth floor, boasting, among other things, an actual mummy. The decrepit state of the building, last renovated while the twenties were still roaring, also aids in the believability of this claim.

The English building, once the Women’s building, makes up the second stop on the triad trail. Several related legends have been popularized. In the first, a woman who drowned in the old basement pool at the turn of the 20th century haunts what is now the atrium, causing lights to flash and doors to slam, striking fear in the hearts of janitors. Black and white photographs of the pool, long past its heyday, reveal a bland, tiled, water stained pit of sorts – very conducive to such horrific tales, as shown at right.

The second version, however, has the woman committing suicide in her room up on the third floor after a messy break-up. The room is now a graduate student office and is also reported to experience the light show and door slamming, in addition to sudden, sporadic cold areas. One spin-off of this version has her harassing only strict professors, while another has her
waving from the third floor windows, much like the unidentified Lincoln Hall woman. The variations are endless.

Completing the “triad” is the Psychology Building where another student is rumored to have committed suicide by throwing himself down the stairs some time ago. In one of the DI articles, a psychology professor recalls a death actually occurring there in such a fashion, though it was apparently never officially ruled a suicide. Legend has it that the student’s ghost now roams the main lobby at various times. Again, the stigma associated with the building, combined with a rich history, helps to create plausibility and foster such a tale. In a building specializing in mental disorders, fear and uncertainty abound and where there is fear, there will always be someone sitting by a campfire exploiting it.

Much has been written about these sightings, but by their very nature they are impossible to prove or disprove. Perpetuated by tour guides, spread by upperclassmen and alumni, the “triad” has become something of an heirloom, a set of tales lovingly bestowed upon each successive generation, standard campfire stories we all can shiver at but laugh off. There is even a student film based on the “triad” which I hope to locate.

Some stories prove much easier to disprove or write off completely. The odds are fairly slim that a mythical corn-shooting robotic creature dubbed “Farmbot” actually resides in the Illini Grove shelter house or that a highly trained group of ninjas guard the Farmbot round the clock. As such, Farmbot receives less attention than the big name apparitions and things deeply entwined with the history of the university as a whole, although recently it seems to have taken hold – a new and emerging myth to explore.
More mundane and widely believed is the story that the Foreign Language Building’s inverted pyramidal design can be attributed to cold war insecurities. Legend has it that the structure will collapse into a bomb shelter should the big one hit, protecting the basement computer lab (once the site of the state-of-the-art Plato supercomputer) from harm. In reality, the building was constructed that way because of spatial considerations: 450 offices had to be packed into the corner of the main quad and everyone wanted their own window. The former associate dean in charge of the building’s construction verifies the second explanation.

The eternal flame is also not what it seems. The name itself is a misnomer: there has never been a flame, only an electric globe light, broken decades ago and finally replaced. The graduating class of 1911 donated a nice, frugal trophy case to the university. The class of 1912 built a “Greek monolith, bearing an electric arc at its top” with a nice, Indiana Bedford Stone seat around it. Since then, rumors have circulated that if two lovers kiss on the bench and the light turns on, they will be together forever. Many couples seem to buy into the romance of it all, as the space is rarely left unoccupied on a warm spring evening. I wonder what the ‘12ers would think?

Another prevailing legend, seemingly one of the most widely known, concerns a network of tunnels connecting all campus buildings. Although no super tunnel exists to connect the entire campus, many smaller tunnels do. The three chemistry buildings at the Northeast end of the quad (Noyes Lab, the Chemistry Annex, and Roger Adams Lab) are connected by tunnels as are many of the buildings from Loomis northward along Goodwin Avenue (the physics tunnel). The plant science lab, too, includes a tunnel of sorts leading to the nearby Turner greenhouses so plants don’t have to be transported
outdoors in the icy winter months. The steam tunnels, however, are a different story, traversing most of campus, although they are not hospitable tunnels meant for transportation and in fact may become deadly should a pipe burst. Most entrances are kept locked except for maintenance purposes, although tales abound of students who’ve embarked upon the underground venture – whole subsets of people, part of a privileged group of steam tunnel “spelunkers”. Not long after I began asking around about these mystery tunnels, I received a Facebook message from a random guy claiming to have a partial map and pictures, although I have yet to follow up on this. Unfortunately, the sheer illegality of steam tunnel exploration keeps many mum on the subject, though ENVS 101 offers the chance to tour a portion of them (safely and legally).

More surprising even than some of these tales are the truths I stumbled upon along my search, little university factoids and oddities I had never heard of, much less considered for inclusion in a research paper based on rumors and lies. However, one innocuously tiny paragraph near the end of an article in an October 1998 issue of the Daily Illini changed my mind. In part, the paragraph states, “In between Altgeld Hall and Henry Administration Building lies a stone commemorating [John Milton] Gregory’s grave site.” Curiosity got the best of me; I had to find it myself. After much snooping (and confused looks from passersby), I finally managed to locate the infamous plaque in front of a large tree, actually facing Wright street (seen above right; John Milton Gregory appears at left). Across the faded green surface
are the words “If you seek his monument, look about you”. With the myriad ghost stories circulating around campus year after year, it’s a wonder the late provost receives so little attention.

Over in the stock pavilion lies another frightening treasure of the university – a prize cow from the 1930’s, stuffed and perfectly preserved. It stands motionless and indifferent in the right side office just inside the southern doors, taking up a large portion of the rather small room. Many people also don’t know that the old butchering area there now serves as a classroom, the meat hooks in the ceiling suspended from the steel beams now creatively replaced by ceiling fans. Anyone who has visited the building at night knows the chill factor is infinitely multiplied by the lighting, which if turned on only in the center allows people on the edges to seemingly appear out of thin air as they approach.

On a more serious note, the saddest and most chilling verifiably true story I encountered concerns the sexual assault and strangulation of a professor, Maria Pia Gratton, on Halloween in 1995 in what was then the sociology building. I am unsure what building this is now or if it still exists, but based upon various accounts, it seems to be somewhere near the school of social work (just south of Roger Adams Lab). The chemistry student responsible for the rape and murder threw himself in front of an Amtrak train a few weeks later. The incident led, in large part, to the First Year Campus Acquaintance Rape Education program (FYCARE), beginning in the fall of 1996, which all freshmen must now attend, though very few seem to know anything about the program’s origin.
The rich history of the UIUC main campus creates an area replete with myths, legends, and rumors of all types. Those most well-known and recurrent tend to be the least believable or most easily dispelled as well as the oldest. Time distances us from horror stories and absurdity cushions our fear so that underneath it all, we feel safe amidst the ghosts and faulty bomb shelters. True stories are often glossed over, especially when relatively recent, because they hit too close to home, occurring in places all too familiar to us, places we pass each day, or because they are so old that they’ve simply been forgotten, overshadowed. In the end, we all believe what we want to believe. Harmless scares are as much a part of our history as the Hallene Gateway itself. Life around here would be much less interesting without them.
Sources

*The Alumni Quarterly* Volume 6 Issue 1, January 1912

Box 35/3/65 – myths and legends at the UofI file

- file note on the Foreign Language Building, October 29, 1998 from William J. Maher, University archivist
- short letter regarding the source of and myths surrounding the eternal flame
- old website printout “strange but true!”, titled “The Plato Lab: A Cold War Survivor!”


*The Daily Illini* October 30, 1998: p.3 “Campus buildings have own legends”

*The Daily Illini* March 18, 2003: p.12 “Myth or Truth: Students create campus legends to personalize University”