



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Legend Quests to Lily Dale

BY LIBBY TUCKER

Of all the legends that I've collected in western New York, my favorites come from Lily Dale: a lakeside Spiritualist community founded in 1879. When you walk through the gates of Lily Dale, you enter a quiet community of 19th-century homes and temples where people try to contact the spirits of their deceased loved ones. This community contrasts so sharply with the surrounding town that it seems like another world. In Lily Dale, people don't just hope to talk to the dead; they *expect* to do so. Unlike American towns where people talk about one or two haunted houses, Lily Dale seems to have ghosts everywhere. One hundred thirty-five years after its founding, it has an even *higher* standing in the Spiritualist religion than it did at the time of its beginning.

To understand Spiritualism at Lily Dale, you have to know about the religion's origins. In 1848, Margaret and Kate Fox inspired Spiritualism's beginnings through rappings that they attributed to the spirit of a peddler who had been killed in their house. At the time when this happened, Margaret was 14 and Kate was 11. Both young women rapidly became famous as mediums. Forty years later, in 1888, Margaret confessed that she and her sister had made the rapping sounds by snapping their toe joints. A year later, Margaret tried to take her confession back, but this effort did not go well. She and her sister died a few years later.

During my sojourn in New York's Southern Tier, I have talked with people who have traveled to Lily Dale for a road trip or vacation. Among these people have been college students and a few friends at my university who like to visit psychics. Some of these friends do not want colleagues to know about their visits to Lily Dale. Like teenagers who slip out of their parents' house to investigate a haunted place, they keep their visits off the radar screen of conventional conversation.

My friend Debbie once told me that when she was in college, she drove to Lily

Dale with a group of friends. "We just had to go there, you know?" she told me. "We ran all around. We thought it was cool to be there." "Did anything happen?" I asked her. "Not really," she answered, "but I thought something might happen if we stayed a little longer." Debbie's trip to Lily Dale with her friends was a typical legend quest; it started with storytelling and ended with discussion of what had and had not happened. Was it problematic that neither Debbie nor her friends had encountered a ghost? No, not at all! All of them enjoyed waiting for something magical to happen, and it seemed okay that nothing startling took place.

When I went to Lily Dale with my husband a few summers ago, I did not view our journey as a legend quest and did not expect anything magical to happen. I was writing a book and needed some material for the Lily Dale section, so this was a research trip. In retrospect, however, I realize that my husband and I did many of the things that legend questers do. During the long drive down the Southern Tier Expressway, I told stories about the Fox sisters' experiences, mediums' encounters with spirits, and magician Harry Houdini's efforts to prove that mediums at Lily Dale were fakers. Once we had arrived and parked our car at Angel House, the bed-and-breakfast where we were staying, we immediately took a walk to visit the Lily Dale Museum and view the remains of the sacred tree called Inspiration Stump. My husband photographed the site where the Fox sisters' cottage once stood, and we attended a service at which mediums received messages from the dead. Later, I went by myself to the late afternoon service where mediums delivered messages from the dead to summer visitors. No messages came for me, but I wasn't really expecting to get any.

After dinner and a walk around Lily Dale, we went to bed early. Our room at Angel House, the Goddess Room, had beautiful artwork: sculptures and paintings of female deities. It felt good to drift off to sleep

after the long day. Early the next morning, I would get back to work.

Suddenly, late that night or in the early hours of the morning, I sat bolt upright on my side of the bed. From the floor on the bed's opposite side came ear-splitting, explosive sounds: firecrackers or gunshots? I looked down at the floor but could not see anything there. Then I looked up at the bed and saw a small animal—a deer or a lamb—lying curled up on the bedspread. The animal glowed with white light and looked very peaceful. Uncertain, half asleep, I lay down again and closed my eyes. I did not open them again until sunlight shone through the window.

The next day I asked Frank Takei, Angel House's co-owner, if anyone else had had an unusual experience in the Goddess Room. Sure, he said, people heard noises there all the time. Some guests called the Goddess Room the "party room," because of all the late night conversation there. None of them had reported an experience like mine, however.

Was my experience in the Goddess Room a dream or something supernatural? No matter how it came to me, the glimpse of the small, glowing animal left me feeling as if I had been touched by magic. For just a moment, in a 19th-century town founded by Spiritualists, I had heard mysterious sounds and seen an enigmatic image. I had gone on my own legend quest, and it had ended pretty well. ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

| | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| \$ 50.00 | Basic Membership |
| \$100.00 | Harold W. Thompson Circle |
| \$150.00 | Edith Cutting Folklore in Education |

Organizations/Institutions

| | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| \$ 75.00 | Subscriber |
| \$100.00 | Partner |
| \$150.00 | Edith Cutting Folklore in Education |

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.