

Ghost Story Of Sarah Cowell

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(Second of two parts.)

A dilapidated buggy frame and a wheel or two are all — well, almost all — that remain of the Sarah Cowell tragedy of 1903.

Something else lingers, a presence, something more than a memory but less than flesh and blood.

Our story begins half a century earlier, when Henry Cowell joined the gold rush adventurers in their trek to California.

He made it down to Santa Cruz in 1865 and paid \$100,000 for a partnership in the lime firm of Davis and Jordan. By 1888 he had bought complete control of the firm for another \$400,000. Cowell's determined efforts built up an international cement trade, and he branched out into land purchases.

The family had moved to San Francisco in 1879; Henry, his wife Harriet and their four children visited their Santa Cruz ranch frequently.

Today the Cowell ranch at the head of Bay Street is the UCSC campus. Henry Cowell was said to have a dim view of marriage, perhaps — as Sentinel Historian Margaret Koch writes — "because of a fear that the Cowell fortune was the magnet that drew the eager young outsiders."

Sarah Agnes Cowell, the youngest daughter, was in her late teens on that fateful May morning in 1903 when she took the family buggy and horse from the stable. Her father had warned her not to take the rig out. It may be that the horse was not yet fully broken to harness.

But off she went, accom-

panied by the ranch housekeeper, to pick wildflowers. Driving the upper kiln road, was she thinking of a suitor denied her? Did she slap the reins angrily?

The horse apparently bolted and the rig surged ahead. Sarah and the housekeeper were thrown from it; the housekeeper was injured but not fatally.

Sarah's fate had been sealed, however. According to the Sentinel of May 15, 1903, she was found lying face down on a pile of rocks, still breathing. An hour later she died in the arms of Henry Ahrens, who with Nat Bowes had rushed from the cooper shop nearby. Here begins the Cowell ghost story.

It is a flourishing legend on the UCSC campus, where each year a few upperclassmen lead wide-eyed freshmen down to the Haunted Meadow. They wait in silence for the ghost of Sarah Cowell to appear.

Sometimes a guide-turned-prankster livens the frightful fun by sneaking away and rustling bushes or moaning from behind a redwood tree.

Is that all it is — a college prank? Or are there shades of ghostly reality to the legend?

Joan O'Donnell compiled student accounts of the legend in 1971 for Gary Gossen's anthropology class. A Cowell College student, she interviewed over a dozen schoolmates who had heard the stories or had other information.

Natalie Horner of Crown College reported that she, like most other students, had never seen the alleged ghost. But she

said she knew a girl who two years before had seen the ghost of the Haunted Meadow ("a transparent, cloaked figure casting an uncanny shadow") in the Upper Quarry on campus.

The Haunted Meadow is located off a fire trail below Cowell College. At night the fog rolls in and out of the meadow, veiling it in mystery.

Robin Reitz, a Merrill College student, also interviewed by Joan O'Donnell, said she went down to the woods on one of her first nights at UCSC to camp. Later she found out that the chosen campsite was the Haunted Meadow.

"One of the guys, Dane Olson, he had gone about — up to the path, intending to come running back and scare us out of our wits," she recalled in 1971. "He came running back, but totally frightened himself, because he said that when he had been walking on this path there, he had distinctly heard footsteps behind him, almost measured with his own...about 20 feet behind him."

Phillip Hofstetter was a Crown College student in 1971 when he told Joan O'Donnell of

a conversation with Dr. Noel King, professor of history and comparative religion and at that time provost of Merrill College.

Hofstetter said King related the following: "Down below Merrill on the firebreak road is the spirit of a young lady, perhaps 20 or 21, not red Indian, and (a) very strong, very strong feeling of this girl, this woman..."

Hofstetter also said he was told of the ghost of an operator of equipment which haunts the forest between the library and the quarry.

Joan O'Donnell concluded that the Cowell ghost story serves as a "rallying point for the student population". One of the students she interviewed suggested the story is nurtured as a budding tradition of the relatively new campus.

The remains of Sarah Cowell's buggy are stored in the UCSC "H" barn. Sarah's body was borne back to San Francisco in a special railroad car.

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Under the Thompson classification system, the Cowell ghost story has elements of Motif E334.2.2 (ghost of person killed in accident seen at death or burial spot) and E421.1 (invisible ghosts). Another aspect is E402.1.2 (footsteps of invisible ghost heard).

But all the classification schemes in the world fly out the window when that creepy moment comes — and you see a real ghost.

Allhallows Eve (Hallowe'en) is upon us, a night of pranks and merrymaking.

And goblins.

And witches.

And...GHOSTS!