Cauchemar may share dorms with residents

Rachel Whittington
Features Editor

Buried in the heart of the Deep South, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette is steeped in native Cajun and Creole folklore.

 Spirits and ghosts comprise an inextricable part of Louisiana folklore. Visitors to Acadiana Village, Vermillionville and Jefferson Island learn about the ghosts and spirits that still wander the premises from year to year.

 But few stories about this campus escape the mouths of residents and students. Those that do often tell of phantoms roaming UL Lafayette’s dormitories.

 “Once upon a time, a long time ago, and nobody can tell you what year,” began Barbara Rickels, professor of English at UL Lafayette and head of the Honors Program, “there was an elevator in Harris Hall, and one of the girls who lived there had her head cut off in a terrible accident next to the elevator; a decapitation of one of the students.”

 This story’s history goes back to the grandmothers of present-day students, yet nobody knows exactly how this tragedy occurred nor if, in fact, one did occur because university officials tend to keep the matter hush-hush, said Rickels.

 This 18-year-old girl’s spirit wanders Harris Hall. She wears a white nightclub and, at times, she carries her head in her hands. She does not speak, but only weeps.

 “She is not threatening,” stated Rickels. “She is not dangerous. She is not scary; she is pitiful. She is a young girl of 18, whose life ended in a horrible, unspeakable way. She is to be felt sorry for.”

 A bricked area remains and no one knows why nor are they willing to explain the mystery.

 But that is not the university’s only bricked room. One room in Baker–Huger Hall also is bricked up. Rumor has it that three girls practiced witchcraft. One of the three allegedly killed herself. Then, a few years later, a different girl moved into the dorm room; she too killed herself. The room no longer exists. Where the door was once just a continuation of the wall. The bricks are visible through the window to the left of Huger’s back door. No one will explain how or why they were put there.

 Instructing that she is a folklorist, who collects traditions that people tell either from their personal experiences or those of their friends, Rickels declared that she is neither a believer nor a disbeliever in the supernatural because of the sincerely presented stories that she has heard over the years.

 “Who am I to say that there could never be any supernatural occurrences?” Rickels said. “As Hamlet told Horatio, There are more things than Earth or Heaven that you dream of in your philosophy. He probably didn’t believe, in ghosts until his father appeared to him.”

 Validity alone does not determine whether people will retell a story, according to Rickels, who added that people love terrible, frightening and supernatural stories, which, as custom has it, snowball and become more intense and electrifying as they are told.

 “So you get these urban legends that spread like wild fire, some people have called them the folklore of the mal,” she said.

 Witnesses to supernatural events rarely come forward, “but their aunt heard it from a friend who really knew that it was true,” Rickels continued, except in the case of one UNL freshman from Carencro, who lived in Voorhies Hall.

 The man ran to Rickels one day reporting that a cauchemar had attacked him one evening in his sleep and that he was waking up from the university. He believed, stated Rickels, that the cauchemar resided in the dorm.

 A cauchemar is a corruption of the French words “couche,” meaning to sleep, and “mal,” meaning badly. It directly is related to the word nightmare, which the American Heritage Dictionary defines as “a dream tousing feelings of intense fear and/or a demon or spirit once thought to plague sleeping people.”

 The cauchemar lives in southern Louisiana, declared Rickels, who continued, “This is not an African voodoo type thing at all; it’s part of the old European tradition of witchcraft, which is very very old, before Christianity, of evil spirits abroad in the world.”

 The Puritans of Salem, Mass., believed that an evil spirit could take the form of a human being, which proved that the person was a witch and had sold his soul to the devil. This spirit in human form would visit sleeping persons.

 The Catholic Church believed that God places these souls in limbo. Some believe that God uses these souls as messengers to scare people into amending their lives. The cauchemars chose and smoother people. Some see it and some people “only feel a heavy weight oppressing them so that they can’t breathe and speak and move,” asserted Rickels.

 But, some survive and some do not.

 “Haven’t you ever hear about people dying in their sleep?” questioned Rickels.

 “Well it may be that a cauchemar did it.”

 The bricked room of Baker–Huger (left of door) is the subject of an infamous university legend involving witchcraft.

 One elderly woman from Broussard told Rickels that when an unchristened baby died, the church members would drain the cisterns, because they “knew that the little soul could not clean itself, and would spoil the water. The water was ruined, but the little soul could not clean itself,” said Rickels.

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The Puritans of Salem, Mass., believed that an evil spirit could take the form of a human being, which proved that that person was a witch and had sold his soul to the devil. This spirit in human form would visit sleeping persons.

The Catholic Church believed that a cauchemar was the spirit of an unbaptized baby. This belief, which is different from that of the Puritans, comes from the idea of original sin and that even this newborn baby was tainted with sin.

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