In January 1981, motorists parked their cars along a narrow rural road in frigid temperatures to catch a glimpse of a scantily-clad phantom.
It was a few weeks before Christmas, 1980. Kim Anderson turned down Kennedy Hill Road and headed for home after attending church early Sunday morning. Snow drifted across the country road and ice glistened on the barren fields. Without warning, she noticed a young woman, around the same age as she, walking down the road toward her driveway. The woman had long, blonde hair, and strangely, wore a pair of light colored shorts.

Kim pulled her car into her driveway and ran into the house. She threw open the curtains on the front room window to see if the woman was going to come up the driveway. She didn’t. Instead, she continued walking toward Byron. Kim didn’t think much of the encounter after that, until she began to hear the rumors.

Between mid-December and early January, dozens of people reported seeing a young woman in various stages of dress walking down Kennedy Hill Road. By January 20, 1981, the sightings had reached a fevered pitch. Wild reports circulated around Ogle County, and motorists parked their cars in the frigid temperatures along the narrow rural road to catch a glimpse of what became known as “The Phantom Lady of Kennedy Hill Road.” Newspaper reports reached as far away as Chicago, and the Rockford Register Star ran five consecutive articles on the sightings.

Kim Anderson was one of the first to spot the scantily-clad woman, but other reports soon followed. Register Star correspondent Diane Moats diligently collected dozens of eyewitness accounts from what she described as “credible” regular folks, “not the kind you’d think would make up something like this.” Years after the sightings, she told Bill Rowe of Rockford Magazine, “Each of them claimed to have seen the woman walking alongside the road. By the time they stopped to see if she was OK, she had disappeared.”

The woman was always described as being inappropriately dressed for the weather, and occasionally barefoot. While many encounters with “the phantom” seemed down to earth, many more crossed the line...
from reality to fiction. At least 20 individuals with whom Diane spoke fell back on a familiar folklore motif; that of the Vanishing Hitchhiker.

They told the reporter that they each knew someone who picked up the young woman and drove her home, only to find out upon arrival and after speaking with her mother that she had died years earlier. In all instances, the mysterious hitchhiker vanished from his or her car when they arrived at their destination.

Dave Trenholm and his friend Guy Harrigan were driving down Kennedy Hill Road the night of January 2, just goofing off and talking about the day’s events. Suddenly, a spritely young woman about 5 feet 7 inches tall jumped out of the brush along the side of the road and began jogging south. Incredibly, she appeared to be barefoot and dressed only in black panties and a black scarf. “I almost wrecked my car trying to stop,” Dave told reporter Diane Moats.

People began to drive out to Kennedy Hill Road, sometimes bumper to bumper, hoping to see the woman. In their attempt to stay warm during the vigil, they left behind a trail of empty beer cans and candy wrappers. Sheriff’s deputies patrolled the road, arrested a few people who were blocking driveways, but found no sign of a wandering woman, clothed or otherwise.

Explanations for the phantom were as diverse and as strange as the situation warranted. One of the most popular theories among local teenagers was that the phantom lady was the ghost of a woman who was buried in a nearby cemetery that had been plowed over. She now prowled the road, searching for her grave.

Another explanation, put forward by Mary Elson of the Chicago Tribune, was that the lady was a mentally disabled girl who had gone missing from her home in Oregon, Illinois around the same time the sightings began. “She reportedly had been seen in Rockford, but had disappeared before police arrived,” the Tribune reported. But the Kennedy Hill Phantom had been seen at various times between December 10 and January 15. How could the missing girl have survived outside on her own for that long?
A third and final theory, even more bizarre than all the rest, was that the phantom lady wasn’t a lady at all. A Rockford man named Ken Rogers told Diane Moats that a friend and he had offered a ride to the “phantom” the day after Christmas. “She said ‘No’ and when we asked her if she was sure, she said ‘yeah,’” he recalled. “My friend said it looked like she was a he, had a very rough voice and was the ugliest person he had ever seen.”

The Phantom of Kennedy Hill Road was never seen again. A decade after the last sighting, Dale Kaczmarek and Howard Heim of the Chicago Ghost Research Society traveled out to Byron to investigate the story. They took pictures of the road and interviewed eyewitnesses, but found nothing. After so much time, the trail had gone cold. “I wanted to see the terrain for myself and examine possible hiding places and rule out the possibility of optical illusions,” Kaczmarek wrote in his book *Windy City Ghosts*.

The Phantom Lady of Kennedy Hill Road proves that folklore is continually being created. An event does not have to take place in the distant past to constitute a legend. It can have a very modern setting and even be caused by a few unusual, but very real encounters that are repeated and distorted until they take on a life of their own. The phantom may have vanished forever, but her story will live on as one of the strangest chapters in the folk history of Ogle County.

Further Reading

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Michael Kleen is an author, raconteur, and occasional traveler. He has a M.A. in History and M.S. in Education. He enjoys studying military history, folklore, and philosophy. View all posts by Michael Kleen

December 25, 2018 / Mysterious America / haunted, Illinois, Rockford

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?
11. Kennedy Hill Road in Byron, IL. Stories have stated that there has been a phantom of a woman walking the road as seen by passersby. The activity and reports of her kicked up around 1981. One woman stated she noticed a young woman walking down the road toward her driveway. The woman pulled her car into her driveway and ended up running into the house thinking she was coming up her driveway but continued walking. Many theories have been passed around about who she could be but the most popular one is she is the phantom of a lady who was buried in the nearby cemetery that was plowed.