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FEATURED

Laurel Highlands Haunts | Legends swirl around young woman's grave

By Mark Pesto

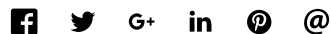
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Snavely Cemetery in Richland Township. Stories say a young woman named Becky was hanged in the 18th century and her spirit frequents the spot.

By Mark Pesto

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According to the stories, a young woman named Becky was hanged in Richland Township in the 18th century.

Sometimes the legends leave the exact nature of Becky's alleged crime unspecified; other times, she's said to have been condemned for "witchcraft." What remains constant from story to story is the location of Becky's grave — a marshy, wooded area near Snavely Cemetery.

Snavely Cemetery, along Mount Airy Drive in eastern Richland Township, has become a magnet for thrill-seekers who believe the legends. Anecdotes about shadowy figures and sudden chills have spread from one blog to the next.

The truth, says paranormal researcher Walter Hutsky Jr., is more prosaic.

"I really think most of the stories come from people going back there over the years and trying to scare each other. It is a creepy place, but there's been nothing credible that I've ever come across," Hutsky, of the Southwestern Pennsylvania League of Apparition Technologists, said.

The "Becky" of the tales was a real person, but the stories about her life, her death and her grave are fabrications, Hutsky argues.

Hutsky's candidate for the real Becky is Rebecca Kring, born Rebecca Wertz in 1807.

She lived in Elton, which in the 19th century was a tiny village of between 100 and 200 people, located 7 miles southeast of Johnstown.

In 1835, she married Samuel Kring, an Elton farmer and lay Evangelical Association minister; they had six children.

Samuel and Rebecca were both killed in a house fire on Jan. 27, 1892. Rebecca was 79 years old – hardly the “young woman” described in the legends.

While the fire appeared to be accidental – The Johnstown Tribune reported that it had been caused by a faulty stove – the rumor was afoot as soon as two weeks after the fatal fire that foul play had been involved.

On Feb. 4, 1892, the Philadelphia Public Ledger ran an article claiming that the Krings had been murdered. Charles Fort, an American author who specialized in compiling reports of paranormal phenomena, relied on that report when he summarized the case in a 1932 book: “A man and his wife, named Kring, had been butchered, and their bodies had been burned.”

Hutsky isn't sure how Rebecca Kring became the focus of such speculation – or why the legends have persisted for more than a century. All he can do, he added, is speculate himself.

“People back then were very superstitious,” he said. “She might have been associated with somebody who was doing fortunetelling, or maybe she practiced it on her own. She might have been doing something else that was odd.”

If Rebecca Kring really is the “Becky” of the legends, the most consistent detail – the location of Becky's grave – isn't even accurate.

Rebecca Kring isn't buried in Snavelly Cemetery; she and Samuel are buried in the stolidly unhaunted Dunmyer Cemetery in Salix.

Hutsky attributes the confusion to a strange episode that occurred soon after the fatal fire. Samuel and Rebecca were originally interred in Snavelly Cemetery – but, a few days later, they were disinterred and reburied in Dunmyer Cemetery.

Hutsky says he's not quite sure why the switch was made.

“I believe Snavelly Cemetery was a family plot of some sort.

“There might have been a falling out, maybe.”

Another area cemetery linked to stories about a woman named Becky who was hanged for witchcraft is Crum Cemetery, located along a Somerset County backroad near Windber.

Crum Cemetery and its “Dead Zone” have been popular hangout spots for scare-seekers – but the legendary Rebecca Crum doesn't appear to have really existed.

Hutsky notes that the tale of Rebecca Crum is “awfully familiar” to the story of Becky's grave.

Mark Pesto is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. Follow him on Twitter at @MarkPesto.

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