

The REALL News*

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi

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Legends in Their Own Time

by David Bloomberg

We all know that albino alligators roam the sewers of New York City, that there is a poor kid dying of brain cancer who needs our postcards to get in the Guinness Book of World Records, and that the library at Northwestern (or was it University of Illinois?) is sinking because the architect forgot to take into account the weight of the books, right? Well...

These are just three examples of well-known urban legends. What is an urban legend? It can be described as a story told as if it were a true account, but which is actually a piece of modern folklore. Why is it of interest to us? First, many of these legends describe events which are paranormal in nature. Indeed, the first popular book on the subject, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, takes its name from a legend many of us have heard as a ghost story, but is often told as truth. Briefly, this legend generally tells of a man who picks up a teenage girl as a hitchhiker and drops her off at a house. After she leaves, he realizes that he had leant her his jacket, and goes back to get it. When he gets there, he is told that the girl was the young daughter of those living there, but she died tragically a number of years earlier, on this very night. The missing jacket is usually found on the headstone of the girl's grave.

It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts. [Sherlock Holmes]

-- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia"

There is no belief, however foolish, that will not gather its faithful adherents who will defend it to the death.

-- Isaac Asimov

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Spooky, and a good ghost story for campfires, but what about when it's told as truth? Even when the subject of the story doesn't deal with ghosts (which most do not), I still think they are of interest to skeptics. I don't abandon my skepticism outside the realm of the paranormal. So when somebody tells me that their friend's father once bought a car that got 100 miles to the gallon, but that car was recalled by the company and the father was paid off not to talk about it, I start to ask questions. Yes, this is also a rather common urban legend, and one that was related to me by a friend of mine several

years ago.

There are other legends which simply don't make any sense scientifically. A final note to many of the scarier urban legends is that the girl in the story had her hair turn white overnight. Possible? No, but it still makes the rounds, being told as "true."

In case you can't tell, I find urban legends quite fascinating.

So where is one to go to find out information on this subject? The most well-known author in the field is Jan Harold Brunvand, a professor of English and folklore at the University of Utah. He has written five popular books on the subject (including the one mentioned above), in addition to several other more scholarly ones. His latest is *The Baby Train*, which came out in 1993.

Brunvand's first two books not only told tales but explained them in terms of story type and history, which was very interesting, but not nearly as much fun as the stories themselves. His latter ones are collections of stories he has gathered through his newspaper column, trips, computer mail, and other various means. In some cases, he is able to track a "new" legend as it begins. (An example of a "new" legend is one that I saw in recent months, which goes something like this: Don't flash your brights at cars without headlights on at night. Police have verified that gangs are now using a new initiation by which they go out in cars without lights and chase down and kill the first person who flashes their brights. (Since this is an article about urban legends, you already know this isn't true, but it certainly got a great deal of computer play, and in some cases media attention, before many people realized it was only an urban legend. In fact, Brunvand wrote an article about this legend in the most recent *Skeptical Inquirer*.) In his latest book, Brunvand also discusses some legends from other countries, several of which are remarkably similar to those here in the U.S.

I decided to write this article because I happen to have been involved in two urban legend tellings lately. Springfield's Channel 20 reported a legend known as "Blue Star Acid" on March 2, including a quote from an apparently believing Sangamon County Sheriff Neil Williamson. This legend claims that drug peddlers are using lick-and-stick tattoos laced with LSD. The most common form of tattoo, dutifully sketched by Sheriff Williamson for the TV camera, is a simple five-pointed blue star. However, we are also warned of tattoos in the form of well-known cartoons such as Mickey Mouse or Bart Simpson. Often, as with similar legends, the (mis)information is distributed through Xerox copies of "WARNING NOTICES," generally filled with words in all-capital letters and lots of exclamation points!!! Channel 20 even showed one of these, which they found at a local dentist's office (I know that's where I'd go as a good source for news). The story tends to grab and scare us as being evidence of the drug dealers trying to hook our children. However, the truth is that it's just not so, at least not in the form it's being told.

According to Brunvand's *Curses! Broiled Again!*, it is "tricky" to completely disprove this legend, because some "blotter acid" (paper impregnated with LSD) was used in the '60s and '70s. However, this was seldom, if ever, given out to children, and there has never been a lick-and-stick tattoo like the ones mentioned in the "Warning" used to transfer LSD.

Since REALL exists in part to distribute information to the media, I immediately sent E-mail to Channel 20, informing them that they had reported a well-known urban legend as truth, and sending them a 1992 article from the L.A. Times, which showed the story to be an urban legend.

Their response? A week later, I received E-mail back which said:

"Thank you for calling NewsChannel 20 Feedback. We appreciate your comments on our story and thank you for the article."

That was it. I followed up by asking if they ever retracted the story, and received no response. Nobody I know ever saw such a retraction.

This is exactly how urban legends continue to spread. The next person from Springfield who tells this legend as truth will likely add on, "It must be true; I saw it on the news!"

The second of the legends involves the boy I mentioned at the beginning of this article. According to the story, Craig Shergold (or, as this one mistakenly told it, "Sherwood") has been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Before he dies, he wants to get into the Guinness Book of World Records for having the most postcards (or, again as this one mistakenly told it, business cards) sent to him. It sounds like a worthy cause, and a co-worker was diligently gathering cards to send to the poor boy. In fact, this story was true...at one time. At the age of 7, he wanted all those cards in order to get the record. Now, however, the boy is 15, he has the record (and the Guinness people will not endorse or support any attempt to break it), the tumor turned out to be benign, and neither he nor the Make A Wish Foundation, often named in the legend, want any more cards. In fact, the family has publicly appealed numerous times for people to stop sending the cards, but they just keep pouring in.

I put a stop to this one as soon as I heard about it, by giving several articles about it to the person asking for cards (these articles can be found on my computer bulletin board and the Usenet alt.folklore.urban archives). He even FAXed those articles back to the person from whom he got the information, so hopefully it will have some sort of backlash effect.

Unfortunately, these stories spread far faster than they can be debunked. For the one that I stopped here, it probably spread in several other directions. People thinking they are doing a good deed will likely continue to send cards to Craig Shergold well into the next century. Likewise, people thinking they will stop a drug epidemic will continue to circulate "WARNING" notices about lick-and-stick tattoos embedded with LSD.

However, I think skeptics should still do what we can to stop these stories when possible. Even though the Blue Star LSD story was apparently not retracted, it did die quickly soon after I sent the information to Channel 20. And while others may send postcards to Craig Shergold, I can assure you that nobody at my office will be doing it again anytime soon. As with other topics, we do what we can and help out by providing information wherever possible.