Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

From prank to legend: The tale of Black Walker

Every community has it's ghost stories and Ripon is no exception.

Many of Ripon's paranormal stories center around Ripon College. In 2014, Ripon College was ranked as the No. 2 most haunted college in the Midwest by Mysterious Hartland. A story in the *College Days* from Oct. 28, 2021 states that the college "has countless ghost stories dating back to the colleges establishment in 1851."

No one is sure of the reason for these ghost stories, hauntings and paranormal activities but several possibilities exist.

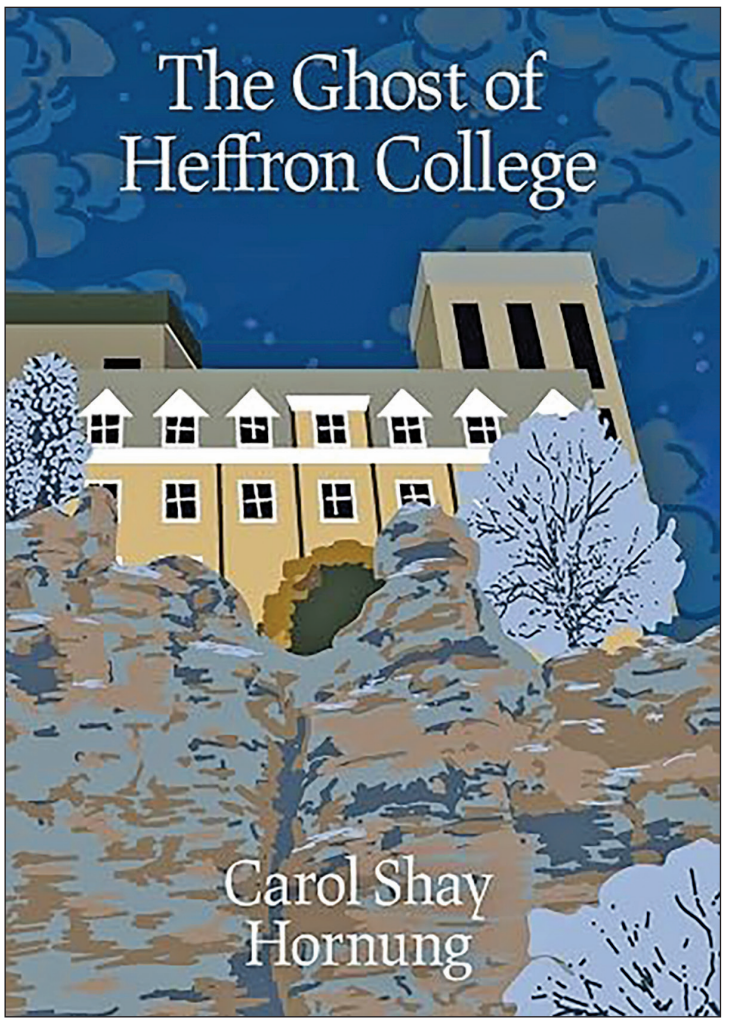
The first is that Ripon College sits on the site of Ripon's original pioneer cemetery, which saw the first burial in 1849. This cemetery was located near the corner of Blossom and Ransom streets. When East Hall, the first building on the Ripon College campus, was built the bodies buried in the city cemetery were moved approximately three blocks west to the present day Hillside Cemetery.

Both Hillside Cemetery and Garden of the Cross Cemetery border the college on half of the north campus. Students walk past these cemeteries to get to classes, dorm rooms and the athletic fields. The school's dining hall, S.N. Pickard Commons, sits on the boarder of Hillside Cemetery along Congress Street. Ripon's Woodland Cemetery is also located slightly northwest of the college's C.J. Rodman Center for the Arts and the Willmore Center.

One of the more recent paranormal stories from Ripon College is the tale of Black Walker of Mapes Hall.

An Oct. 21, 2022 story in the *College Days* quotes the then senator of the Ripon College Paranormal Investigators Club Logan Meyer about Black Walker.

"The story goes, in Ripon College, on the night of Halloween, 1985, a group of fraternity students interested in occult practices decided to test their beliefs on the second floor of Mapes Hall," said Meyer, class of 2023. "In one of the student's rooms, they prepared for a conjuring, ripping open a section of their carpet and painting a red pentagram on the floor where they meticulously placed five black candles at each of the five points in hope to confine what evil entity may become. The group then proceeded to recite a powerful passage backwards from the Book of Spells, and, in doing so, spoke a spell greater than the original words of God when he commanded creation."



CAROL SHAY HORNUNG, Ripon College class of 1988 wrote the 2018 fiction book The Ghost of Heffron College. The book utilized many of the haunting and paranormal stories found at Ripon College. *submitted photo*

It is believed that the students were using a type of cheap, superficial or sensationalized grimoire, which is a book of spells. These are based on the Grand Grimoire, which is a manual or textbook of magic spells, rituals and instructions for summoning spirts.

Accounts of the evening differ. Some state that the students had to pull up carpeting in a dorm room to paint the pentagram, while other accounts note that the ceremony took place in a second floor hallway which had no carpet at that time. Other accounts mention that the summoning happened in room No. 204.

"To the students surprise, black smoke began filling the center of the pentagram," Meyer said. "Unbeknownst to them, the students had summoned a powerful, evil demon, known as Black Walker. Upon seeing the demon, one of the students panicked, knocking over one of the candles before running off. As a result the barriers of the pentagram broke, unleashing Black Walker from his constraints and binding him to Mapes Hall."

The legend notes that after the summoning of Black Walker the maintenance department of Ripon College removed or painted over the pentagram.

This action supposedly allowed Black Walker to, as Meyer explained, "be released from the confinement of Mapes Hall and free to roam the campus of Ripon College."

Black Walker (also sometimes referred to as 'Shadow Walker' or 'Dark Walker') is described as a 7- to 15-foot-tall shadowlike dark figure with red eyes.

Some students believe that Black Walker still is contained within the boundaries of the Ripon College campus for several reasons. The first is two monuments in Hillside Cemetery, which look like trees. It is believed that the demon cannot go near them as they are talismans of good, and thus holding Black Walker on the campus.

The second is Garden of the Cross Cemetery, which is laid out in the shape of a cross. The cross is transversely aligned, meaning instead of the cross facing east, it faces north. Because of this, some people believe that the magic is twisted and only spirits of neutrality can only exist in this area.

One account states that Black Walker has two weaknesses. The first one is that he cannot leave the campus. The second weakness is that he is between dimensions and cannot physically hurt people. However, it is believed that he can influence a person's thinking to the point that they hurt themselves. A few accounts state that Black Walker has frightened people into amnesia.

The 2018 fiction book "The Ghost of Heffron College" was written by Carol Shay Hornung, Ripon College class of 1988. This book includes a demon not unlike Black Walker.

An Amazon review of the book states, "This book was inspired by two small liberal arts colleges in the upper Midwest, and people familiar with one or both campuses will find Easter eggs here and there in reference to those schools." The books cover could be interpreted as looking like Bartlett Hall, found on the campus of Ripon College.

While at Ripon College, Hornung was a member of the now disbanded co-ed fraternity Theta Sigma Tau. This fraternity was housed at the east end of Mapes Hall in the 1980s when Black Walker was supposedly summoned.

Hornung recently spoke to a few of her fellow fraternity members about Black Walker. She stated that she had "found out some interesting things ... and things weren't what they seemed.

"In the school year 1985-1986, there was a student in 203 Mapes, a tiny single room. He was cautious of the occult and another student pulled a prank on him. He obtained a master key, opened the door and drew the pentagram on the floor, in Sharpie, if I remember correctly, and closed and locked the door.That was it. The student was furious — not just because his belief of the occult had been made into a joke, but because his room had been entered ... and the maintenance department had to scrub the Sharpie off the tile floor."

Regarding the summoning of Black Walker, who she refers to as "Dark Walker," she explained that there was "No candle, no demons, no sightings, no grimoire.

"I came back for an alumni weekend around 2015 or so. ... We have a Tau reunion from time to time and I was able to talk to people who graduated in the 90s and later. They told me about the Dark Walker. I heard the legend about how a group of Taus drew a pentagram and summoned a demon that escaped and that there had been a priest called to exorcise it.

"Me being me, I looked at the circle of people and realized we covered all years from the 1980s through the present day and said, 'What year was the priest summoned?' No one, of course could answer because it didn't happen. I knew about the prank, but no one else in later years knew about it — they only knew the legend of the Dark Walker.

"The Walker didn't start making appearances until after all the students from 1985-86 had graduated/moved on. Residual memories of the prank, passed along like a game of 'telephone' from original students to later students may have evolved into the Walker's background story. The sightings of the Walker have faded, and Theta Sigma Tau is no longer on campus, so the Walker may be at rest. Something weird happened and a story evolved based on an old prank ... and that's how humans think."

It is unknown how the Ripon College "demon" became known as "Black Walker." Hornung noted that "one of the tales of the Walker includes him carrying a stylish walking stick and that may have inspired its name."

A Scottish legend exists regarding an ominous entity known as the "Black Walker of the Ford." A shadow walker has Germanic and Anglo-Saxon roots to a demon that glides and hunts silently in the dark of night.

Mapes Hall, 638 W. Campus Drive, is a student residential building named after the city's and college's co-founder David P. Mapes (1798-1890). It is part of "The Quad" residential complex found on the western side of the upper campus and houses upperclassmen and members of Phi Delta Theta fraternity.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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