

Haunting lady stands up a crowd of 200 admirers

by Gisela Meier

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It was a little like waiting in the pumpkin patch for the Great Pumpkin to appear.

Except instead of just a faithful Linus and a skeptical Sally, approximately 200 people gathered at the Yorba Family Cemetery on the night of June 15 to await the appearance of the famed Pink Lady.

Legend has it (and there are several versions to the tale), that every two or five years on June 15 the apparition of a woman in a pink dress walks among the tombstones to visit her relatives (either her children or her mother and aunt).

Her haunt is the small cemetery located at the east end of the city, where old pepper trees shade the decaying stone and wooden gravestones. The site, established in 1858, is reputed to be the oldest cemetery in California.

As darkness fell on the memorials and the long grass, several dozen observers of all ages gathered around the grave in the northeast corner of the cemetery, said to be the resting place of the celebrated lady. A lamppost cast a glow on the large, white oleander bush that grows on the spot.

Although some sources relate the Pink Lady to the Yorbas, the barely legible wooden marker on her grave seems to lend credence to the version of the legend that says she was a member of the De Los Reyes family.

The most consistent story about the ghostly lady concerns her death. It seems the young lady, dressed in a pink gown, was on her way home from a dance when her carriage was involved in a fatal accident along Kellogg Road. According to some stories, the social event she had attended was her graduation ball at Valencia High School.

As the stars and electric lights began to shine on the cemetery, the crowds continued to grow. While some waited quietly, others were busy swapping ghost stories and narratives of personal experiences.

"I'm interested to see if other people have the same thoughts that I do on death and life," said Yorba Linda resident Ellen Fallon. "I believe there are things that are unexplained and I'm curious."

Cobi and Larry Bush, from Placentia, said they would be very disappointed if the Pink Lady did not show up, but that they were also looking for more information about the woman and when she might appear again.

Local resident Kevin Flynn said he was there "just to see if it can really happen."

Distinguished visitors included Charles A. Moses and Raymond Bayless of the Southern California Society for Psychic Research. Both men are also members of a psychic society in London, one of the oldest organizations of its kind.

Also on the scene were skeptics and disbelievers, who came to confirm their doubt or perhaps just to spend a social evening under the stars.

Norma Albers said she had come to accompany a young friend who wanted to see the ghost.

"My little friend was so excited that I had to come down," she said. "But I don't think there will be any Pink Lady.

"I think it's just a rumor," said Justin Zitny. "I don't believe in ghosts."

At 9 p.m. security guards closed the cemetery and asked everyone to leave. The crowd gathered outside the low fence near the grave, strolled around the grounds, or sat in the park on blankets or chairs. A few teenagers with long-range goals had brought sleeping bags.

Flashlights swept through the cemetery and photographers' flashes lit up the grave, as a small group of teenaged true believers tried in vain to keep the crowds quiet.

To help pass the time, more stories about the Pink Lady were recalled and related.

"Two years ago a guy was driving along Kellog when he picked up a lady hitchhiker dressed in pink," related Mary Winney. "She was cold so he let her use his jacket. He brought her to her house and after he left realized he didn't have his jacket. So the next morning he went back to the house but the people there told him she had died 100 years ago. So he went to the cemetery and on her grave he found his jacket.

Stories of previous appearances of the famed phantom also abounded, although all the stories seemed to be second-hand.

"Six years ago on June 15 there were a few people here and the ground started to shake," said 12-year-old Matt Merkle. "A wind started moving, but only through the graveyard. After about 30 seconds a pink cloud went up in the center of the cemetery. It stayed up there and then disappeared."

One of the security officers patrolling the area said his boss had seen a pink figure one night at 12:15, strolling through the cemetery and visiting some of the graves.

Tina Swain told of another occasion when a group of youngsters were making a night-time visit to the cemetery, at that time surrounded by a nine-foot tall wire fence.

"They were around her grave and they saw her come out," she said. "They got scared and started running away. One guy tried to jump the fence but his arm got caught and ripped off."

T. A. Merkle and Tom Swain recalled an incident four years ago on June 15 when they and some other friends were chased out of the cemetery by Ruben the caretaker. When they returned later that night a very pale Ruben told them he had seen the Pink Lady.

The hour grew later and a carnival atmosphere pervaded the crowd, as empty beer and pop cans rolled along the sidewalk outside the cemetery. Some people left feeling the situation was not right for an apparition.

"I don't have the feeling she's coming. There's too many negative feelings here," said Simmy Deeb, who said she has seen several apparitions in the past.

"If you were dead would you want to show off in front of hundreds of people?" asked a 16-year-old commentator who wished to remain anonymous because he admitted to having stolen a gravestone from the cemetery.

He added that although he has lived near the graveyard for eight years, he has never seen anything unusual there.

At approximately 11:40 p.m. the lights around the cemetery (but not around the adjacent park) went out. Lounging ghost hunters were on their feet in an instant, crowding around the fence for a glimpse into the cemetery.

But they were all stood up and the lady never showed.

Instead excited fingers pointed to the light which had illuminated the woman's grave. It was flashing oddly, and occasionally glowing pink. In about five minutes the light gradually came back on.

"I think that was it," remarked Placentia resident Jim McDowell. "I think she came and went and no one saw her."

The crowd's excitement again peaked at midnight, the legendary haunting hour. However, by 12:30 no ghostly visitor had appeared and the crowd began thinning.

"There was no significance to the light going off," said psychic researcher Bayless, on his way out. "That belief is a deplorable result of misinformation. Interference with electrical equipment is not a valid part of psychic phenomena. Besides you rarely have a psychic phenomenon in a cemetery, and there is no solid story connected with this location."

"However, it is a charming place," he concluded.

Nevertheless, the question remains: why did those lights go out?

Photo caption:

IN THE SHADE OF A PEPPER TREE-Covered by a large white oleander bush, this grave in a corner of the Yorba Historical Cemetery was the center of attention the night of June 15, when a large group of people gathered to see its presumed occupant, the Pink Lady, make her appearance. Although dramatically dimmed lights set an appropriate stage for the famous phantom she either failed to keep her appointment or decided to keep out of sight. (Star photo by Gisela Meier.)