

The Fourteenth State

Mysteries, Oddities, and Mischief

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A classic collection of thirteen stories of Vermont oddities, myths, and mysteries was published in 1971 by Vermont Life magazine under the title “Mischief in the Mountains.” Co-editors of the project were Walter Hard Jr., who edited the state magazine from 1950 to 1977, and Janet C. Greene, a contributing editor to the magazine and the wife of Stephen Greene, founder of the Brattleboro publishing house of the same name. The stories were illustrated with suitably dark and scary sketches by Jane Clark Brown, known for her political cartoons. Various writers contributed, including Stephen Greene and Walter Hard Jr. plus others including Ralph Nading Hill and Richard Sanders Allen, with an epilogue by Charles T. Morrissey, all prominent historians of the time.

Discussing this book calls for some personal comment. As librarian of the Bennington Museum I have had the occasional inquirer call or come in wanting to research some other-worldly or supernatural event or cluster of mysterious disappearances. So many have inquired into the so-called Bennington Triangle, an unstated location where people supposedly vanish, that I have collected the inquiries in a file. The question often involves the town of Glastenbury, which is called a “ghost town” because there are two villages in the town that are no longer inhabited. I respond by stating that a librarian deals in documentation, and there is no documentation about supernatural events. In Glastenbury there is only one disappearance of record, and that took place in 1945, seventy years ago.

Therefore I have gained new respect for the episodes in “Mischief in the Mountains” because they are mysteries or oddities that indeed have been documented. One of the best known of these is the “murder” of Russell Colvin of Manchester in the early 1800s. More than one book has been written about it and there was a recent television program about it. Also known as the Boorn-Colvin case, it has become unique in the annals of American jurisprudence because there was a defendant, Stephen Boorn, who confessed to the murder of Russell Colvin; Boorn was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. But, dramatically, before the sentence was carried out, lo and behold, the victim suddenly appeared in the flesh.

“Mischief in the Mountains” leads with the grand case of “Chester's gentleman burglar.” Chester had worked itself into a frenzy because of a maddening series of community thefts, which had no clues as to a culprit. Among those who put up reward money was Clarence Adams, a selectman and distinguished citizen. When the proprietor of an art gallery quietly set a trap involving a shotgun to be fired when a window was jimmied, the burglar was caught and he was none other than the prominent Clarence

Adams. The mystery deepened after Adams died while in state prison at Windsor and the reader is left with the unsolved question of whether Adams was clever enough to have faked death and arranged his escape.

An odd story involves a legend in Woodstock, where citizens have burned the heart of a person thought to be a vampire. Questions arose as to whether a vampire really existed, or indeed what was the definition of the term in the first place. At least the story is replete with names and dates and quotes from published newspapers. A legend was documented.

Real events are told of 1816, “the year without a summer,” when volcanic ash from the explosion of an Indonesian volcano blanketed the earth, caused snow to fall each month, and prevented crops from growing.

Another is a tale of fabrication. “The Deep Frozen Folk of Farmer Morse,” tells of somewhere a time long ago when elderly folks were frozen at the beginning of a long winter and thawed out in the spring. Author Wesley S. Griswold takes a scientific approach as he debunks the science but relates the sturdy nature of a regional myth. This proves again that even when relating myths, mysteries, and oddities, documentation is fundamental.