

Creepy weeping

Folklorist puts new twist on old tale of watery Mexican ghost 'La Llorona'

By Christine Stephenson
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Ed Walraven has been looking for La Llorona, but she hasn't shown up yet.

Maybe he should thank his lucky stars.

A brush with the ghostly figure of Mexican folklore usually isn't cordial, and the woman isn't known for her conversation. She's known for weeping as she searches along rivers, canals and lakes for her lost children, whom she drowned in a rage of despair over her lover. You don't want to get in her way, and if you're a child, you don't want her to mistake you for her own.

But that menace just makes her more intriguing for Walraven, a lecturer in the Texas A&M University journalism department who left a position as assistant director of the university's Office of Public Information two years ago to dedicate more time to his love of folklore. Now pursuing a doctorate in the subject, the West Texan has always been fascinated by the legends and ghost stories of Texas and the Southwest.

It was a course on folk narrative Walraven took in 1989 that kindled his interest in La Llorona, and the research he started then was solidified in an article that appeared in the professional journal *Western Folklore* this summer.

La Llorona is well-known in folklore circles. Some scholars say the legend of the woman who murdered her children goes back as far as the Greek story of Medea, Walraven says, but more conservative researchers cite references to a wailing woman easily recognizable as La Llorona in Spain, before Colum-

bus even came to the New World. She came along, too, establishing herself so strongly in the folklore of Mexico that most people around the Mexican-American communities of the Southwest know her name, and many still fear the prospect of a visit.

"While I was doing my research, I would encounter people who said, 'A lot of people I know still believe in that,'" Walraven says. "Of course, it was never them."

Even a legend as old as La Llorona must keep up with the times or it will lose meaning for the people who tell it, so in his research Walraven tried to document sightings of her in a place with more significance for urban Mexican-Americans: the city dump.

La Llorona has been reported to have appeared at landfills in the Southwest on at least two occasions, Walraven says. Since remote waterways are hard to come by in the cities to which most Hispanic populations have shifted, he theorizes, finding La Llorona looking for her children at the landfill would be a logical extension of the

legend if it had fused with a more modern legend.

This one is rooted in reality: Some women have disposed of unwanted infants in trash cans or dumpsters.

"It has become one of the urban legends of our society," Walraven says, "and, unfortunately, it's probably one of the urban legends that has more truth to it than some of the others."

But babies don't turn up in trash cans often, and Walraven's theory about La Llorona gave him a chance to explore another of his main interests, the role of the media in spreading or perpetuating urban legends, or modern folklore that some people may



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(cont.)

just call rumors.

People tend to think children are abandoned in that fashion more frequently than they are, Walraven suggests, because reading it in the paper or hearing it on the news leaves a powerful emotional imprint that lingers long after the report fades.

“Knowingly or unknowingly, the media helps spread (urban legends) or helps people believe them more readily because ‘it was in the paper,’ ” Walraven says.

The specific details of a rumor or urban legend are very important.

“That’s one of the things that makes them believable,” he says.

In the local Hispanic community, stories about La Llorona would likely be set in familiar places such as the Brazos River, local creeks or drainage canals, or nearby lakes.

Because the legend is set in a recognizable place, it becomes more relevant to the people who share it. And the more relevant a legend is, the more likely people are to believe it and heed its hidden messag-

es. Buried in the frightening tale of La Llorona, for example, is a message to children to stay away from dangerous places.

“Halloween is the perfect time to talk about this,” Walraven says. “There’s the folklore belief of the supernatural being more active at this time of year. The American society has added the twist of the urban legend of kids in danger at Halloween.”

The abduction and murder of a University of Texas student who was spending Spring Break in Matamoros in 1989 sparked a rash of Halloween rumors about kidnappings by hippies, cultists and drug rings, he says. That fall, an East Texas school canceled its Halloween activities because of a rumor that children would be kidnapped and murdered by drug cultists that night.

So sometimes urban legends can take their spin off actual events, which is one reason Walraven isn’t too disheartened that no one else has reported La Llorona showing up at the dump . . . yet.

“Most folklorists, deep down inside, are just hoping there might be something to this.”