

1-1-1998

A Matron's Story (Dept. of Journalism student paper)

Kelli Quinn
Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/pemberton_hall_ghost

Recommended Citation

Quinn, Kelli, "A Matron's Story (Dept. of Journalism student paper)" (1998). *The Pemberton Hall Ghost*. 16.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/pemberton_hall_ghost/16

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Pemberton Hall at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Pemberton Hall Ghost by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Kelli Quinn
"A Matron's Story"

BOOTH LIBRARY
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS 61920

Almost every myth and tale, no matter how fantastic or tall, has its roots somewhere in a true story. Often, as with the stories of ancient mythology, the stories attempted to explain the unexplained. Other times, the true legend has become garbled through exaggeration and inaccurate retelling. Ergo, a tall lumberjack became Paul Bunyan, and his bluish-tinged ox became Babe.

Say the name Mary Elizabeth Hawkins to most Eastern students and alumni, and you will elicit blank stares. Ask them about the Pemberton Hall ghost, however, and their eyes grow wide and their heads nod. Most are able to relate some version of the ghost story: a young coed staying in the dormitory over a vacation early in the century was killed by a crazed janitor. She crawled to her room, barely clinging to life, and was found dead the next morning. According to the story, her spirit still walks the halls of the almost 90 year-old building. Students who are really up on their ghost lore might recognize Hawkins as either the student who was killed on that night, or as a witness to the murder.

None of the ghost story is real. There is no record of anyone ever being killed in Pemberton Hall, by a crazed janitor or otherwise. Mary Hawkins, however, was real. She worked at Eastern, then the Eastern Illinois State Normal School, as the head of Pemberton Hall from August 1910 to March 1917. Her story begins in southern England and extends to New York, Illinois and the mountains of Colorado before ending in a hospital in Kankakee. It is a maze of dates and places, with gaps and dead-ends of destroyed records and rumors that can be filled in with a little conjecture. The maze, if patiently followed, is an amazing tale of a woman who was all too human, and whose death at 41 fostered tales of scandal and murder, some of which were partly true. And, like most mazes, it is best to begin it at the end.

Mary Hawkins died in the Kankakee State Mental Hospital late in the night on Oct. 29, 1918. She had been a patient of the hospital since earlier that month. It is very likely that she died alone, and was found dead during the first patient-check of the next day.

Public mental health institutions of the day were often lonely and hopeless places. The truly mentally ill were mingled with people with minor and fatal diseases and the indigent. "Places like those in Illinois, and all over, at that time were filled with people who were not crazy. Sometimes they were sick with something else, or were older people, or just didn't have anyone to take care of them or any money," said Barbara Krehbiel, a genealogist and historian with the Charleston Carnegie Public Library. The annals of psychiatric history are filled with horrible descriptions of dirty hospitals with as many rats as inmates and patients victimized not only by their own illnesses, but also the neglect of often overworked and undertrained staff. It was the very best care that you could get for \$98 for what was about a four week stay.

It was not the first time Hawkins had been under psychiatric care. From Sept. 12 to Sept. 25, 1918, she was a patient at the M.A. Montgomery Memorial Sanitarium in Charleston. While under the care of Dr. J. W. Alexander, Hawkins received no special treatment in that hospital. According to the bill filed in the probate of her will, she was charged only for room, board and

“ordinary” nursing during her stay. On the day of her discharge, Alexander and her regular physician Dr. Thomas H. Barlow filed a petition to the Coles County Circuit Court. They asked for, and were granted, a hearing to determine if Hawkins was legally insane.

Information from the hearing held a few days later, filed with the probate of Hawkins’ will, indicates that she had a year-long history of mental illness. The “attack” that had put her in the sanitarium in September was an intensification of a “brain disease” that she first exhibited symptoms of over a year prior. Although she was in good health physically, the two doctors described her as suffering from a variety of mental problems. They testified that Hawkins was “depressed and irrational,” tormented with delusions of persecution, hallucinations, a lack of sleep and memory loss. According to them, the illness had been brought on by “overwork and over worry.” She was “not suicidal, homicidal or destructive” the men claimed, but she had needed restraints in the past, and could no longer be adequately cared for in this area. Along with the September stay in the Montgomery Sanitarium, a term in a Jacksonville hospital during her first episode had not helped her. Judge John Harrah agreed with Barlow and Alexander, and ordered that Hawkins be sent to the Kankakee Mental Hospital for care. On Oct. 2, a servant of the court escorted her north on the railroad. Fred G. Hudson, an employee of the First National Bank of Charleston, petitioned for and was granted conservatorship of Hawkins’ estate. It was now his responsibility to care for her financial affairs.

Hawkins’ final descent into madness must have happened very quickly. As late as September 2, 1918, she was still a functioning member of the community, buying a raincoat at a local dry goods store. “She must have snapped,” said Krehbiel. “No one really knows why,” she said.

After her death, Hawkins’ body was quickly transported back to Charleston by train. The funeral service was held in the main parlor of Pemberton Hall. Because of the still-raging war in Europe and deadly influenza epidemic, she could not be sent to her birthplace in England for burial, and was therefore interred in Mounds Cemetery in Charleston. According to an article in the *Normal School News*, the Nov. 2 funeral in the dormitory was well attended by residents and acquaintances. The *Charleston Daily Courier* eulogized her as “a woman of education and refinement”. “Very seldom,” the obituary continued, “does one find in the same individual good business ability, a most excellent housekeeper, and a fine influence over young women . . . her death is sincerely mourned by all those who knew her.”

After taking a close look at some hidden facts about her life and death, one must wonder how well any of her Pemberton Hall charges or friends in Charleston really knew Mary Hawkins.

* * *

Hawkins was born, according to Coles County records, on Sept. 10, 1877, in the city of Moat in the county of Shropshire in England. Her parents were John and Mary Hawkins, both of whom were in their late 20s when their daughter was born. Records indicate that they had a son named John, and that she was their second child.

There is little to suggest what her young life was like. A few things can be reasonably guessed with entries in later Coles County records and a little knowledge of the England at the time. Hawkins’ upbringing was probably typical for a girl of late Victorian period, full of what modern women would consider restrictions and centered around the family and home. Records

claim that she had a "collegiate" education, but it is not known where or when. The fact that she had such an education indicates that her parents were at least of the middle class. Her father was perhaps a shopkeeper, a manager of a business or perhaps a worker in one of the many coal mines or refineries in Shropshire. Because higher education for young women was still not the norm, Hawkins' schooling suggests that either her parents were liberal minded, she was strong-willed and intelligent, or a little of both.

For an unknown reason, Hawkins found life in England unsatisfactory, and at age 24 boarded a ship out of Liverpool headed for America. In 1901, she landed in New York. Here, Mary's path disappears for two years. She applied for American citizenship in Coles county in 1903. Again, there is little record of what Hawkins was up to until late 1910, when she was employed at the Eastern Illinois State Normal School in Charleston as the matron of Pemberton Hall.

The rules of Pemberton at this time were radically different than those today's residents are familiar with. According to Charles Coleman's history of the school's early years *Eastern Illinois State College: Fifty Years of Public Service*, the second president of Eastern, Livingston C. Lord, wanted a women's dormitory at the college in hopes that it would provide a social center for the school. After fighting several years for funding, the dormitory was completed in 1909. Lord's hopes for the hall were quickly fulfilled with weekly dances and socials held in the main lobby and dining hall of Pemberton.

However, to convince the parents of young women to allow their daughters to live in Pemberton, the rules had to be strict. The rules described by Hawkins to the dean of an Iowa college in 1914 in a letter included in Coleman's book describe a place whose propriety was above reproach. The residents were required to attend nightly study sessions during the week from 7:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. The young women were then allowed a half-hour of free time until lights-out at 10:30. No men were allowed on the residence floors. The only places Hawkins' young charges were permitted to go without a chaperone were classes and church on Sunday.

Hawkins, apparently, enforced the rules with a passion. The medium-sized, fair-skinned woman whose dark hair was coiled in a no-nonsense bun in a 1913 yearbook picture, took her job as the protector of the young women very seriously. In a 1914 senior scrapbook page featuring famous faculty quotes, Hawkins is included with her, "It's ten-thirty. Lights out! I don't want to tell you again." According to Coleman, any violations of the rules were swiftly dealt with by Hawkins personally.

Her dedication did not mean that she did not take out time for herself. On January 13, 1916, Hawkins bought two plots of land in the resort town of Green Mountain Falls, Colorado. One of the plots contained a summer cottage.

Part of the Pike Forest National Reserve, later Pike National Forest, the Green Mountain Falls area had been home to summer resort towns since the late 19th century. The possibility does exist, however, that Hawkins did not journey to Colorado for pleasure. According to the local chamber of commerce, this remote area was home to several health spas. Hawkins may not have bought the land in hopes of being a tourist. She may have been looking for a cure.

Pictures of the present-day Pike National Forest available on various world wide web sites suggest a mountain paradise. Hills are covered by grand conifer trees that reach lofty heights in the clear, cold air. Lakes and springs are full of some of the purest water in the country. It is home to the famous Pike's Peak, one of the tallest mountains in the continental United States. A national reserve since 1905, little about it has changed since the times of the first white settlers.

"The land in that area is beautiful. There's nothing like it anywhere else on earth," said Eastern alum and Colorado resident Sarah Durry.

The upper- and middle-classes of the turn-of-the-century traveled to the mountains in hopes that the fresh, cold air and spring water would ease a variety of ailments from tuberculosis to arthritis. The disease that Hawkins may have been seeking respite from was a little different than these.

According to the death certificate filed in the Kankakee courthouse, Hawkins died from what was called "general paralysis of the insane". This was the archaic term for what is now known as paresis. In the 1998 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, paresis is defined as the psychosis and partial paralysis caused by the destruction of brain tissue by late-stage syphilis. It is characterized by deterioration of the personality, delusions, loss of memory, and convulsions. Although remission is possible, untreated the disease is fatal. Primitive treatment for it was not available until late 1917 in Austria, and effective treatment did not come until the discovery of penicillin. Paresis develops in only about 3 to 5 percent of untreated syphilis cases, and can take anywhere from five to 30 years to fully develop in the patient.

Syphilis itself was, at this time, most commonly transmitted through sexual contact. The disease progresses in three stages, with a latency period between the final two that can last a few months or a lifetime.

Because of this latency period, it is impossible to tell when Hawkins may have contracted the disease. She may have gotten it while still a young woman in England, leading to her immigration in 1901. Perhaps she contracted it in one of the two periods during her life in America where there are no records of her whereabouts, or maybe she got it in 1916, leading her to seek a cure in the rest and fresh air of Colorado.

Whatever the circumstances, Hawkins probably realized that she was ill. In the summer of 1916, she went on leave from Pemberton Hall, and might well have visited her new property in Colorado. According to a scrapbook from 1916, she hosted a Christmas celebration in Pemberton, complete with "real English flaming pudding". In 1917, perhaps in a real fit of mental illness, perhaps because her disease became known to the administration, she went on leave from her position.

It is understandable why her superiors would not have wanted Hawkins at the school if they knew the true nature of her illness. According to Krehbiel, at that time, syphilis was looked upon as a disease of prostitutes and the men who frequented them. "It would have been very embarrassing if it got out that the woman in charge of watching over young women had a sexual disease," she said.

Hawkins probably realized that she did not have long to live in early 1918. While in a lawyer's office in Champaign county, she wrote her will. In neat, flowing handwriting, she willed all her worldly possessions to her mother in Harbrow, Birmingham England, including her clothes, books and jewelry.

* * *

Mary Hawkins' story does not end with her death at a young age. Hints in documents filed with the probate of her will and rumors that still circulate around the campus suggest that Hawkins may have had one last secret.

In a letter to the Coles County court dated Dec. 26, 1918, James B. Rosebraugh, a local

man, claimed that he was the legal representative of "infant heirs, whose names are unknown" to the estate of Mary Hawkins. He petitioned for and was granted a probate of the will.

During that probate, Fred Hudson, now the executor of Hawkins' estate, testified under oath that he had made "diligent inquiry to ascertain the heirs of Mary E. Hawkins" and was unable "to ascertain who they are or where they reside" except for her mother.

The will in which Hawkins' mother was named the sole heir was the one that was recognized by the court and carried out by Hudson. However, the nagging question remains of who Rosebraugh was referring to in his petition to the court. It could have been referring to a second will written by Hawkins after the one the court decided to enforce. Or, it may have been more scandalous than that.

There is no record of Hawkins ever having a child. In the record of her insanity trial, she is listed as never being married, having any children or ever being pregnant.

Did Mary Hawkins, an immigrant who became the respected matron of Pemberton Hall, contract a deadly disease while working for the Eastern Illinois State Normal School? Maybe it was from a lover of her earlier years, and she left England in an effort to see something of the world before she succumbed to it. Did she have a child, who could still be living somewhere in America today? Hawkins took the answers to these questions with her into her madness and her grave. It is possible no one living will ever know them. What can be said, is that the tale of Hawkins' ghost will go on. It is within possibility that after her death, Hawkins' spirit returned to her post to continue her job of protecting her Pemberton Hall charges, caring for the only children she was allowed to have. Maybe tonight, she will mount the main staircase with its ornate woodwork rails, and begin her rounds, much as she did before her sad, lonely end 80 years ago.