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Gast! City's Ghosts Evoked

A Storyteller Says New Yorker Ignore the Lessons of History

BY LISA LIPKIN

On a shivery night in New York in the 1920's, a full moon scudded eerily across a darkling, windswept sky. All was still in the cemetery besides St. Mark's Church. The construction crew that had paved Second Avenue had finished its work, though in the process, it had cut off a corner of the cemetery.

Suddenly, the bell atop the church started ringing wildly. The sexton, still in his nightgown and cap, stumbled toward the church and unlocked the door, and the ringing just as suddenly stopped. But inside he found that the bell rope had been severed, and the next morning he found the other half of the rope—in the vault where Peter Stuyvesant was buried.

The feisty Dutch governor of New York was not one to ignore a slight. Even now, it pays to mind your manners when you walk past St. Mark's Church on a windswept October night, or you may see a milky white apparition in the cemetery or hear a mysterious tapping: Peter Stuyvesant making his rounds on his wooden leg.

Ghost stories. Every year at about this time I tell audiences young and old about the New York that used to be and the spirits of the past that live on here. I've been doing it for seven years now, and their reaction has taught me a lot about New Yorkers.

For one thing, they have no sense of the city's past, no feeling for how today fits into the fabric of yesterday. They

ignore the lessons that history can teach. Yet even the most serious and sober of them find in these stories a license to be young again.

New Yorkers are determined to believe that life in the city today is the worst it's ever been. They're convinced it used to be better. Back in 1862, the city health inspector wrote: "There are so many mercenary landlords who only contrive space so that they can stow the greatest number of human beings in the smallest space." He longed for an earlier, gentler, New York—like 1777 perhaps. That's when John Adams declared New Yorkers to be the rudest people he'd ever met and bemoaned the good old days when gentlemen still in Manhattan. He must have been referring to the start of that

century, the era of Captain Kidd, a time of filth and disease when cutpurses and bandits roamed the streets.

Kidd is the central figure of one of the great New York ghost stories. A British general who lived down on Wall Street until he turned pirate, Kidd amassed a fortune in gold and jewels by plundering every ship in sight. After his death by hanging in London, Wall Street con men sold shares in a hunt for Kidd's lost treasure. But the captain took to that unkindly. At one downtown meeting of investors, his ghost appeared and blinded all those in attendance. And to this day, on Halloween, Kidd's bluish form can be seen at night on the streets of lower Manhattan, winding through manholes and keyholes, looking to blind anyone still in pursuit of his hidden treasure.

When I tell such stories to adult audiences, I see a different New Yorker from the one I encounter on the street. The cynicism and chip-on-the-shoulder attitude drop away, and men in three-piece business

suits, fresh from a power lunch, wear expressions on their faces that harken back to Halloweens gone by. It's not so cool to ride the playground slide or the carousel in Central Park, but the performance provides an acceptable opportunity to be a child again.

In fact, I think the oral tradition of storytelling has a lot to offer in the way of helping us cope with the trials of living in New York. It is an exercise in imagination, which television has almost removed from our experience. Historic legends can help us put our urban woes in perspective, calming the spirit. And the recapturing, even for a moment, of the innocence of childhood can bring a note of sanity into our lives.

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