

# Tales

Continued from Page 1

at numerous campuses, garnished with different details but essentially the same stories.

The rumor that if a dorm resident's roommate commits suicide, the resident receives a 4.0 GPA for the term has gained so much national popularity it was made into a movie, "Dead Man on Campus."

"My brother said they do that at his school [Virginia Tech]," freshman Ashley Rogers said. "But I'm not sure if they really do or if he's just being stupid."

Graduate student Bill Hammond has heard that one, too, as an undergraduate at Berkeley. "I heard it but never believed it," he said.

He's right. According to the San Fernando Valley Folklore Society's "Urban Legends Reference Page" (www.snopes.com), no university in the United States has such a policy. And Sherman confirms that the University is no exception.

But students continue to tell the story, sometimes adding that it really happened to "a friend of a friend."

"I think it stems from the fact that a lot of people aren't happy with their roommate," said Bill Holmstrom, assistant resident director of Hamilton Complex. "It's kind of a fantasy to think about — their roommate would be gone, and they wouldn't have to do anything in school."

Many other campus urban legends spring from fear — fear of failing, fear of a new place, fear of being alone, said Barbara Mikkelsen of the San Fernando Valley Folklore Society.

One tale, in which a dorm resident returns late one night and leaves the light off, is featured in the movie "Urban Legend." The resident awakens the next morning to a murdered roommate and the words "Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?" written on the wall. This legend addresses the fear of living on one's own.

"The legends help by identifying dangerous behaviors that should be curtailed and simple precautions that should be taken," Mikkelsen said. "As such,

## Fact vs. fiction

Many urban legends circulate on the Internet and through e-mail, disguised as news stories or factual items. Here's how to distinguish fact from urban legend:

1. Be wary of "authoritative" attribution. It doesn't take much to say a story is from a newspaper.
2. If it doesn't sound like a news story, it's probably not. Look for specific details and the full attribution of quotes.
3. Be skeptical of anything promising something free.
4. Disbelieve anything that urges you to forward the message to all of your friends.

SOURCE: Barbara Mikkelsen, The San Fernando Valley Folklore Society

they help put the student back in the driver's seat — or at least give him the comfort of thinking he's back in charge."

Unlike the 4.0 rumor, some college legends originate at a specific university, where they become a part of that campus' cultural identity. The University has a few of these, many of them reflecting a fascination with the structures on campus.

According to an older legend, whenever a virgin walks by, the Pioneer Mother is supposed to stand, Sherman said. In another version of this tale, found in the book "A Study of American Folklore" by Jan Brunvand, the Pioneer "father" whistles at passing virgins.

While these stories are obviously false, other campus legends have a factual basis.

In the residence halls, RAs often tell residents of a fire that destroyed a dorm room in Bean Complex three years ago, said Joshua Greenough, an RA in Riley Hall.

"We use it to tell people to make sure they don't have candles and things," he explained.

The fire, which actually happened, has become an integral part of campus lore.

Many students have also heard

that Bean Complex used to be a prison but was converted to a residence hall.

"The reason for that one is because the architect who designed Bean Complex also designed prisons," Greenough added.

Finally, Greenough said his freshman residents are convinced that a network of underground tunnels connects every building on campus, another popular legend at the University. Some add that the tunnels are now filled with telecommunications equipment and are inaccessible.

"I think my freshmen are going to be looking for tunnels all year," he said.

These types of urban legends result less from fear than from a desire to belong, Greenough believes.

"I think because it's a new place, and they really don't know anything factual about it, the stories help their perception of what the University is," he said. "They can kind of put their hands on it and say, 'This is what it is.'"

While freshmen are often credulous about University folklore, especially those stories based on fact, Sherman finds that most students no longer believe the more outrageous and horrifying urban legends. She attributes this skepticism to the urban legend's fairly recent initiation into pop culture.

"It's become a common term. People know how the tales are produced, and they don't believe it," she said. "In the past I've had students say, 'You mean, this didn't actually happen?' But that hasn't happened for a long time."

As students become more familiar with urban legends, they disbelieve them at increasingly younger ages, so the campfire storyteller has a harder time convincing the audience of their factuality.

But that doesn't mean the traditional art of folk-telling is dying out, Sherman added.

"I believe people are still telling them around campfires; it's just their ages are getting younger and younger."



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