

The Legend of the Blue Light Lady

By Jim Hoy, Professor Emeritus of English at Emporia State University

Originally Aired 10/15/2020

On May 29, 1864, 21-year-old Elizabeth Decker married Ephraim Polly in Clarke County, Iowa. A couple of years later, Ephraim, a military hospital steward, was assigned to Fort Hays. Whether or not his wife had been trained as a nurse or was instead a compassionate Good Samaritan, when cholera struck the fort in 1867 Elizabeth worked with the victims of the dread disease, offering them comfort and attempting to ease their suffering. Later that same year she died after contracting cholera herself.

As with most folklore, however, there are variations in the story. One attributes the disease outbreak and her death to scarlet fever. Less believable are versions that she was killed in an unspecified battle or that she was turned out of the fort at night during a blizzard with only a lantern because she had felt compassion for a nearby band of Indians and was offering them food and medicines. But the true cause was cholera.

Elizabeth asked to be buried at the top of Sentinel Hill, where she often went for walks, but instead she was buried at the foot of the hill because of the solid rock that lay just below the surface at the top. She was buried in a blue dress and a white bonnet and was given a full military funeral. Four stone posts were planted at the corners of her grave. Soon thereafter, however, the posts were stolen by four men. Perhaps they were cursed for disturbing her grave, for in a short time each of the four had died violent deaths, one in a gunfight, one hit by a train, and the other two killed in a buggy wreck.

After that, Elizabeth's spirit apparently rested easy for half a century, but then she began to make repeated appearances in the vicinity of Sentinel Hill. In 1917 farmer John Schmidt saw a woman in a blue dress walk into one of his farm buildings, but when he followed her into the shed, there was no one there.

On an intensely foggy night in the early 1950s a policeman on patrol near Sentinel Hill radioed in to headquarters that he had just hit a pedestrian, a woman dressed in blue wearing a white bonnet. But when he got out of his car to look for his victim, there was no body to be found and his car was undamaged and showed no evidence of having struck anyone.

Since 1917 to the present, there have been many more sightings of Elizabeth's ghost near Sentinel Hill, many of them stating that she emits a hazy blue light, thus the term "Blue Light Lady." Sentinel Hill has, not surprisingly, become a "legend trip" destination for high school and college students at Hays. Especially at Halloween they will go to the hill in hopes of seeing her. Here is one eye-witness report: "The apparition crested the hill and floated above the prairie like a stray tumbleweed. It paused once to glance up at the full moon, then continued on its descent toward our hiding spot in the bushes. As the blue light drew closer, the shadows of her face became distinguishable features and the pattern of her long, prairie dress and bonnet came into view, and even though the apparition faded before touching the ground, I heard footsteps shuffling through the dirt."

A couple of years back I gave a talk on Kansas legends at the Hays Public Library. No one there had actually seen the Blue Light Lady, but everyone knew her story. Today Elizabeth Polly has been commemorated with a Pete Felton statue in a city park that bears her name.

This transcript of "The Legend of the Blue Light Lady" is part of the Humanities Kansas Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.