

“DIE WEISSE FRAU (THE WOMAN IN WHITE)”

Editorial Comment: The story below relates to one of the most unique hoaxes ever visited upon the community of Freeman, South Dakota. The time was the fall of 1928. The author of the story, Duane Schrag, a retired language teacher now living in Freeman, has kindly granted permission to reprint it here. It first appeared in the Winter 2004 edition of [The American Society of Germans From Russia](#), Lincoln, NE.

It was the fall of 1928, just 13 months before Black Thursday, and the people of Freeman, South Dakota, like the rest of the country, were beginning to feel the pinch of an impending depression. Money was becoming increasingly scarce, and chicken theft was not uncommon. Such thievery may have been the indirect cause of one of the most unique hoaxes ever visited upon this community. It was a prank that escalated into community-wide hysteria and inspired at least one copycat caper.

It all began with the sighting of a ghostlike woman dressed in white at the Carl Miller farm. The locals referred to her as die weisse Frau (“the white woman” or “the woman in white”). This was a community that at the time was still speaking primarily German. Jonas Huber continued to record the minutes of the Heilbronn Township telephone meetings in German until 1948. And, although most of the young people no longer speak German, the community is still proclaiming its German heritage with an annual three-day Schmeckfest celebration.

The account in the 13 Sept. 1928 Freeman Courier reads, in part, as follows: “The other night the dogs were barking fiercely and later on quit. At about 2 o’clock in the night they again started to bark and Carl Miller went to the door and to his surprise a woman dressed in white came to the door. He asked her what she wanted and the answer was ‘nothing.’ She then went away...” The weekly newspaper went on to say that some locals had thought that the woman was a somnambulist, a sleepwalker.¹

Leland Miller, who was seven at the time, remembers the incident somewhat differently. He was sleeping in his second floor bedroom, when the family dog began to bark on the side of the house exposed to his room. The parents also slept upstairs. He is not sure whether he awoke when the German Shepherd started barking or when his father came into his bedroom to check on the disturbance that moonlit night. Leland did not get out of bed and did not see the woman. But he saw his father open the bedroom window and heard him call down to the woman and ask her who she was and what she wanted. As he recalls, the woman said nothing (without the Courier’s quotation marks). The younger Miller recalls that his father later said that the woman “ignored the dog as she approached the west entry of the house” and that the dog “threatened to bite her but never did.” He cannot recall that his father ever went to the door.²

Later there was speculation that the woman may have been Doris M. (not her real name), who was rumored at the time to have run away from the Human Services Center (then called the Yankton State [Mental] Hospital) 35 miles away and that she may have followed the railroad tracks from Freeman, which lies five miles southwest of the Miller farm. The tracks (now gone) ran past the house by not further than 70 yards.

Doris, who was twenty-two years old at the time, had been a patient at the hospital for several years. If it was indeed she who had come to the Miller residence, her appearance there would initially seem somewhat unusual, since her family lived quite a few miles west of Freeman, and the Miller place is east of town. At least ten miles separated the farms. She also belonged to a different dialect group. But she may have avoided her home due to animosity toward her family. A reliable source, who shall remain unnamed, stated that Doris despised her parents and siblings because they had put her into the mental hospital. They readmitted her shortly after her return to Freeman, and she died at the hospital six years later...

In any case, Carl Miller's reputation was impeccable, and nobody doubted his story.

But the series of sightings was just beginning. The next week the 20 Sept. Courier recorded the following appearances:

"A good many strange things happened in this old world but there is something out in the East Freeman community that baffles the whole neighborhood. When reports reached town that a woman dressed in white is [sic] seen out there it didn't take long we heard Mr. Robinson threw her out of the [Freeman Junior College and Academy] dormitory... Last night before getting ready for printing we called up all the places where she had been seen and here is what each one said. Ferdinand Walter, who is boarding at the Henry Wilde place in town, says when he walked home late in the evening, somebody dressed in white was at the gate. It didn't take Ferd long to decide what to do. He turned around and went to the other side of the house to enter. ...Saturday night A.A. Graber's dog seemed very much disturbed. Sunday morning Mr. Graber's son saw this woman in the corn field. They missed their dog and later found the dog in the cornfield killed by a rifle bullet. Yesterday morning at 3 o'clock Mr. Mohler's brother saw this woman at J.C. Neufeld's farm. A corn crib burned down at the A.A. Graber place and the presumption is, at least with some, that this woman may have caused it. All who saw her say it's not really a white dress, but...a kind of white sheet. ...She is barefoot and the footprints are almost too large for a woman. Tuesday almost 400 men were out in the cornfield looking for this woman. ..."³

Although Editor J.J. Mendel states that he phoned various people to verify the sightings, he says no more about the Robinson rumor. The Oct. 5 Star, the bi-weekly student paper, had a paragraph on the incident. But whether anyone besides Robinson saw her is not clear. The article reads, in part, "The white woman ... visited the old dormitory. Some of the girls are rather excited about this affair. Some of them are even afraid to go out of the building after supper."⁴ And a September 16 [1928] notation in the 1929 Lark, the student annual, reads as follows: "Dorm girls fear attack by 'White' woman."⁵ The only living student resident who resided in the old dorm, where the intrusion supposedly occurred, cannot remember the incident. And two of the ladies who lived in the new dorm remember the incident but cannot recall whether any residents witnessed the intrusion or whether the episode was a hoax. These ladies are now all in their 90s.

Having moved to Freeman from Kansas two years earlier, Elmer Robinson, the cook for the two dormitories, likely didn't know Doris. Perhaps he learned the next day who she was, and Mendel, in deference to the family's feelings, dropped the matter. Darlene Robinson, who was four at the time of the dormitory sighting, vaguely recalls that her father chased a loitering woman off one of the two porches attached to the old dormitory, where the family lived in an apartment.⁶

All evidence points to Sunday as the day when the cornfield sweep took place, not Tuesday, as the Courier states. It is likely that Tuesday is the day the corncrib burned. It is hard to determine whether there were actually 400 men trying to flush out die weisse Frau. But Earl Gering, who was eight at the time and whose father was among those who made the drive, said that someone was in every other row. He said, "The woman couldn't possibly have escaped." 7

Lillian Tieszen Glanzer, ten at the time, remembers riding to church that Sunday forenoon in the family car. The country road to the church happened to border the cornfield, and the group was just beginning the attempt to flush out the elusive woman. She recalls people on telephone poles as they strained to get a better view of the hunt. Then her father drew the curtains on the Dodge so that she and her siblings in the back seat would be spared any sudden appearance of the dreaded woman. 8

For several weeks, the woman in white held the area in her grip. Dr. Wilbert Hieb, then an eight-year-old neighboring Marion resident, remembers the city's siren blowing one morning between 1 and 2 a.m. His father got up and went to the fire station. There was no fire. Someone had spotted the mysterious woman in a field southwest of town and sounded the alarm. The elder Hieb didn't join the fruitless search, but some of the firemen did. 9

Parents would not let their children go anywhere unescorted. Marian Graber Gering, three at the time, said that her father wouldn't allow her older sister to walk to country school, transporting her by car.¹⁰ And Marian's husband Earl added, "Houses that had never been locked were now being bolted." 11

The A.A. Graber in the Courier article was Andrew Graber, who, after his dog was killed, watched his cornfield being trampled by men on foot, men on horseback, and dogs. He then watched his corncrib burn just before harvest. Andrew had inherited not only his father Andreas's first name and surname but also his nickname, Skurra, which in Russian means "pelt." Since the gnome-like Andrew was extraordinarily short and pudgy (with a bulbous nose), the South German diminutive was added, and he was known as Skurgele (pronounced ShKUHrgelie).¹² His adopted¹³ son Willard, of stocky medium height, had a reputation as a troublemaker and had acquired the nickname Hickey, after a certain Hickman, a notorious British gangster of the period.¹⁴ The nickname was apparently appropriate. Nellie Graber Kunkel, Hickey's sister, says that he was involved in "every devilment there was. He was trouble."¹⁵

Although Willard had already blamed the woman for killing the dog, he didn't claim to have seen her until that Sunday, when his dad asked him to round up horses that had broken out into the cornfield. It was Sunday morning, and Hickey had just gotten into an argument with his father about going to church. He didn't want to go and, according to Erwin Graber, was looking for an excuse to stay home. He saddled a horse and headed for the cornfield. Soon he "came galloping back," claiming to have seen the strange woman.¹⁶

Word got around, and soon there were many sightings. A common Schweizer announcement was, "Ich han sie gesieht."¹⁷ The sightings quickly jumped the boundaries of the East Freeman Swiss enclave, and reports expanded to include the hutterische, plattdeutsche, and schwäbische Dialekte, the other three major language groups in the community. Some observers claimed that

there was a strange light surrounding the apparition, which fostered speculation of an Irrlicht, a ghost light.

Cleon Graber was only two years old at the time but remembers people talking about the episode for years afterward. His father, Carl J. Graber, was one of the horsemen who helped scour the cornfield. As Cleon remembers it, the hoax began as an attempt to cover up chicken stealing. Hickey was stealing chickens from his father and selling them for pin money. Shortly after Carl Miller saw the woman, Skurgele announced that someone was stealing chickens from the family's flock. Eager to divert suspicion from himself, Hickey suggested the likelihood that it was die weisse Frau and promptly set out to lend credence to his explanation. Soon he was enjoying his newfound activity. Andrew's wife Helena had a soft heart and put out food for the woman one night, and in the morning the food was gone, proof that the poor woman was stealing chickens because she was hungry. When he killed the dog, Hickey deliberately left prints of his bare feet, and his father decided to call the sheriff. He then torched the crib, knowing that the neighbors would rally to douse the corncrib fire and obliterate the nearby tracks.¹⁸ If Graber's sequence of events is accurate, he offers a neat package. But this order of events differs from the sequence described by Erwin Graber.

That food was put out for the woman there is no doubt. Erwin Graber said that Hickey went to check the offering the next morning, ate the food, took off his shoes, and left barefoot tracks.

Hickey was only fifteen when he pulled off his hoax. Erwin Graber, his friend, was sixteen and knew all along what was happening. He was at the Sunday sweep and also claimed to have been present at the crib burning, along with some neighbors who had arrived too late to save the structure, which burned quickly due to the spaced wooden slats that facilitated the corn drying process. Erwin said that Willard lit the crib before breakfast, between 6 and 7 a.m. He had been "snapping" corn for the hogs from the edge of the field that was next to the hog lot. The crib was nearby, and Hickey poured gasoline at one end of the structure before lighting it. Later as the group poked around in the ashes and speculated about what happened, Hickey gave Erwin a knowing grin.

Erwin stated that it all began when Hickey clubbed the dog to death with a neck yoke and blamed the woman. He said that Hickey never liked that dog. So if that explanation is accurate, the account in the Courier that the dog was shot was erroneous, and so is Cleon Graber's claim that chicken stealing precipitated the sightings. Yet, reports that chicken bones were found at a rural Evangelical church, where the woman supposedly dined, would support the fowl theft theory.

Kunkel exclaimed, "Don't believe anything Risser [Erwin's nickname] said. He had more to do with this [incident] than he wanted to admit. And Hickey wasn't there to defend himself [during the taped interview]." Kunkel says that Hickey "loved that dog." She's certain that Hickey didn't shoot him, insisting that the dog was shot and not clubbed. She claims to have seen the bullet hole.

Kunkel also says that she overheard Hickey tell their mother to make two sandwiches to put out for the woman and that later Erwin joked how good the food was. She further states that she was present when the corncrib went up in flames. She recalls that it was quite early in the forenoon

but doesn't remember the time. Kunkel said, "For some reason, 'Dicke' (stout) Jake [Jacob E. Graber] had come to our place that morning, and everybody [the family and the visitor] was at least two city blocks from the crib. I was there, and so was Hickey." She says that Erwin was absent, and she thinks that he may have torched the crib himself, although she agrees that Willard likely was the instigator.

That Erwin lit the crib makes a certain amount of sense. If Willard was coming under suspicion by that time, he probably tried to continue the hoax by drawing suspicion from himself and giving credence to the ghost theory.

Although Erwin's account doesn't connect chicken stealing with the white woman, Erwin stated that Hickey stole not only chickens from his parents' coop but also hams from their smoke house. He sold them in Parker, where he wasn't well known. And when the family quit raising chickens, he stole cream and sold it. Erwin blames Hickey, in large part, for causing his father eventually to lose the farm.

Erwin stated further that Hickey occasionally skipped church [Salem-Zion Mennonite]¹⁹ and stole homemade wine from several neighbors' cellars while they worshipped. Since this was during Prohibition, people didn't want to admit having alcoholic beverages. Another reason for not wanting to admit possessing wine is that the Church frowned on the consumption of alcohol. The Communion wine even today is not really wine but grape juice. Several parishioners bent the rules, and Hickey knew who they were. The victims reported grape juice having been stolen. Hickey quipped to his friends that that was the "best grape juice" he ever drank. Erwin stated that Willard was feeding a liquor habit even at that early age.

According to Erwin, the Sunday morning when Hickey claimed to have sighted the woman, the neighbors began to gather at the Graber farm. The sheriff had been called and arrived early. A large number of neighbors had gathered already in the forenoon, some on horseback, and prepared to scour the field. Even in those days, word traveled very fast, since the crank telephones were on a party-line system. Neighbors not only knew who was being phoned by the assigned sequence of rings for each subscriber but also often listened in on conversations. Erwin said that the flushing-attempt was well organized, with men on foot and horsemen placed alternately. The 60-acre field was thoroughly covered in one swath.

That the Andrew Graber family was sorely distressed by the series of events is evident by the "Card of Thanks," which appeared in the 27 Sept. issue of the Courier: "We desire to take these means to extending [sic] to our neighbors, friends and county officials our warmest thanks for their kindness and interest shown and the assistance given us in guarding our home and property during the recent 'Wild Woman' episode.... Especially do we feel under obligation to those who were with us during the night. -A.A. Graber and family." 20

Erwin said that by late Sunday many, including the sheriff, suspected that Hickey was behind the shenanigans. But Hickey, whom the sheriff grilled thoroughly, denied involvement. Erwin stated that the corncrib burning several days later was almost anti-climactic, since by then Hickey was the prime suspect. Later while imbibing, he bragged to his friends about his woman-in-white prank.

Erwin said that Willard was one of 11 baptism candidates that fall, and the youths were undergoing catechism instruction. But because of unresolved problems with Hickey, baptism was postponed until November. He was finally baptized with his peers. But Kunkel says that later, after a different incident, the deacons asked him to relinquish his membership. He responded by saying, "Consider me out." And he never set foot in the church again.

Some time after the wild woman episode, the sheriff solved the unrelated stolen hams case. But when he told Andrew who the culprit was, he refused to press charges. Erwin said that a naïve Andrew had been upset that the sheriff interrogated Willard during the ghost woman case. He just couldn't believe that his son was responsible for these activities.

Erwin said that Hickey "had a heart of gold, and in many ways people liked him." He also stated that he was a hard worker.

Kunkel, who was 14 at the time, said that Willard always felt that the community never really accepted him and his three siblings, all of whom were adopted. She blames his anti-social behavior, at least in part, on this belief and agrees that she and the others felt a bit the same way. But the other three did not rebel, as did Hickey. Roy, who eventually lived in California, even went on to become a millionaire. Hickey left the community and lived in San Diego, where he married and served in the Navy during World War II. He was in his 50s when he died, said Kunkel, partly because of the ravages of alcohol abuse, which ruined his liver.

The last mention of the woman in the Courier was on 4 Oct., a month after the first report. Editor Mendel's somewhat stilted style reads, in part, "...the last report we heard comes from Beadle [County]. The woman is caught in Beadle and it took no police to do it and no secret detective worked on the case. ...A young man came home late in the evening and found the woman standing at the gate. He jerked the steering wheel to the side and went down the ditch. Knowing that the woman is close and with her eyes on him, he jumped down went through the fence to the house and made alarm. With the woman at the gate who can sleep? So the father and sons armed with guns prepared for the attack. The orders were shoot to scare but not to kill. She was surrounded and believe it or not, woman [sic] clothes filled with straw is all they found. The neighborhood boys played one on the young man." 21

While there is little evidence that any of the four major German dialect groups here believed in Hexe (witches) or Hexerei (witchcraft), some residual memories of an earlier period undoubtedly persisted. Some German groups, especially the Pennsylvania Germans, painted symbols on barn doors to ward off witches. These symbols seem reminiscent of the gargoyles of medieval Europe, which were supposed to frighten away evil spirits.

It is probably no coincidence that the sighting of die weisse Frau had such a grip on the community, albeit for only several weeks. It seems that many German groups believed in witchcraft in the Old Country and brought their old beliefs with them to the United States. Folklorist Timothy Kloberdanz says many German-speaking groups believed in the weisse Frau phenomenon. He says that she is a "supernatural, ghost-like being that can be seen at night and can even be heard to wail at times." 22

Kloberdanz relates further that the Catholic Volga Germans chalked “symbols on doorways well into the 1900s. ...and some families continue this practice today.” These marks, he explains, had a connection to the Feast of the Epiphany and brought good luck. He continues, saying that the Volga Germans “sometimes painted an Alpfuss (pentagram-type design) over the barn door to keep away evil.” And other German groups painted the words in German “The Blood of Jesus Christ.”²³

It is hard to determine how much belief in the supernatural influenced the reaction of the Freeman community. It is tempting to think that such a hoax would meet with considerably more skepticism today. But each generation thinks it is more enlightened than the previous one. In many ways, superstitions still persist. We still have witchcraft, and the term witchhunt seems more than just a convenient metaphor. We also have not given up our belief in charms and talismans. Placing human nature in historical context and understanding human psychology of a different period are indeed difficult tasks.

1 “East Freeman,” Freeman Courier, 13 Sept. 1928, 8.

2 Leland Miller, Spokane, Washington, telephone interview 28 Apr. 2004.

3 “Personal,” Freeman Courier, 20 Sept. 1928, 1.

4 “Locals,” The Star, 5 Oct. 1928, 3

5 “Hysterical Historian,” The Lark, 1929, 35

6 Darlene Robinson, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, telephone interview 20 Sept. 2004.

7 Earl Gering, Freeman, South Dakota, personal interview 17 Feb. 2004.

8 Lillian Tieszen Glanzer, Marion, South Dakota, personal interview 17 Feb. 2004.

9 Dr. Wilbert Hieb, M.D., Freeman, South Dakota, personal interview 9 Nov. 2003.

10 Marian Graber Gering, Freeman, South Dakota, personal interview 13 Apr. 2004.

11 Earl Gering, personal interview 13 Apr. 2004

12 Warren E. Schwartz, *In the Far Country* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Augustana Printing Service, 1984), 99. In his highly fictionalized account, Schwartz seems nevertheless accurate in both his description of Andrew and Hickey and his explanation of the source of their nicknames.

13 Schwartz, 99. Schwartz’s account states that Hickey was Andrew’s grandson and that he adopted him after his son drowned. This is false. Andrew and Helena née Mueller had no children of their own. Willard’s sister Nellie Graber Kunkel states that the four siblings were all adopted and were all of different Western European nationalities, none German. Willard was of English origin.

14 Schwartz, 101.

15 Nellie Graber Kunkel, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, personal interview 15 Nov. 2003. Kunkel, who was present when most of the activities took place (including the Sunday hunt), has an extremely sharp mind at 90.

16 Erwin Graber, Moundridge, Kansas. In 1981 Bill Gering, Mishawaka, Indiana, taped an interview with Erwin Graber, who was 69 at the time and has since died. He had moved to Kansas several years after the episode. The various Grabers mentioned in this article are either not related to A.A. Graber or are distantly related.

17 “I saw her.” (High German: “Ich habe sie gesehen.”)

18 Cleon Graber, Freeman, South Dakota, personal interview, 12 Jan. 2004

19 The author has been a lifelong member of Salem-Zion, a rural church. He was 10 years old when Andrew died in 1942 and remembers him quite well. By then Hickey had been long gone from the community. But the author met him in San Diego in 1950 and agrees that he was very congenial. He cannot recall whether the white woman episode was discussed.

20 “Card of Thanks,” Freeman Courier, 27 Sept. 1928, 10.

21 “Personal,” Freeman Courier, 4 Oct. 1928, 1.

22 Dr. Timothy Kloberdanz, Ph.D., North Dakota State University, Fargo, e-mail exchange 12 Dec. 2003.

23 Kloberdanz, e-mail 5 Dec. 2003.