Historians of American Catholicism have traditionally paid little attention to stories of hauntings in Catholic communities and institutions. Even though Catholicism itself is saturated with supernatural concepts and beliefs such as the Resurrection, miracles, transubstantiation, and even possession and exorcism, historians have tended to focus on larger issues of Catholic integration (or lack thereof) into American society and Catholic influence on society and politics. The study of Catholic ghost stories may seem trivial in that regard, but ghost stories can be very revealing when looked at in the proper light.

Of course, your average American Catholic probably knows of or has heard of at least one “true” haunting. Aside from providing entertainment and conveying a sense of mystery, ghost stories can actually have important cultural and social purpose. Every time a ghost story is told someone is recounting a version of past events, though it may not be the official one. Ghost stories are a form of history, telling the stories of people and tragic events that were not always represented in the traditional histories of their day. Many ghost stories tell of women, immigrants and religious or ethnic minorities whose lives were not the focus of professional history until the second half of the twentieth century. Through ghost stories, their history, achievements and tragedies were kept alive in a non-traditional way.

Western Pennsylvania has many ghostly and supernatural tales, and quite a few of them are linked to Catholic immigrants, institutions and communities. Each of these stories serves as a connection to different aspects of the region’s Catholic past, and links us with the lives of our ancestors. The tales that will be recounted here deal with art, education, work and ultimately death. We will begin with a haunting that was tied to one of Pittsburgh’s artistic treasures.

Maxo Vanka, a Ghost, and the Millvale Murals

The story of the apparition that appeared to the artist Maxo Vanka in St. Nicholas Croatian Roman Catholic Church is one of the most circulated ghost stories in western Pennsylvania. The church itself is located in the Pittsburgh suburb of Millvale, and today is known for its beautiful murals that were painted by Vanka. Most of the Croatian immigrants that arrived in western Pennsylvania in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s settled in Millvale and other nearby Allegheny River towns such as Allegheny City (later Pittsburgh’s North Side) and Etta. St. Nicholas was constructed in 1900 to meet the needs of the growing number of immigrants.

A fire had damaged the inside of the church in 1921. Insurance paid part of the repair cost and the parish paid the rest, taking out loans. By 1937, Father Albert Zagar, the pastor, had paid off the church’s debt and was looking to improve the interior of the building. He wanted to have new murals painted on the ceiling and walls. Zagar had seen and admired the work of Croatian artist Maxo Vanka during an exposition in Pittsburgh several years earlier. He had hoped to bring the artist to his church to do the work, but was unsure how to contact him. He sent a letter to Louis Adamic, a Slovenian writer living in New York City, thinking he could help find him. As luck would have it Adamic and Vanka were friends, and the letter found its way to the artist.

Vanka was born in Zagreb, Croatia in 1889, possibly the illegitimate son of a noble. He developed a love for art at an early age and eventually attended the Royal Academy of Beaux Arts in Brussels, Belgium. During the First World War he served in the Belgian Red Cross rather than fight and remained a lifelong pacifist. The carnage he witnessed would have a lasting impact on his work. After his service he returned to Croatia to teach art. His works became well known in Europe and were displayed in many institutions. In 1931 Vanka married Margaret Stetton, the daughter of a prominent New York surgeon. They moved to New York in 1934, but Vanka had difficulty selling and promoting his art in America. The invitation to paint St. Nicholas was welcome news.

The beautiful, and sometimes disturbing, murals that he painted in the church would secure his reputation in America. They are full of powerful and sympathetic imagery depicting the horrors of war, the hardship of life for the immigrants, and the faith that sustained them. They reflected much of the personality of Vanka. Those who knew him described him as having the "gift of sympathy". He was known for sensing the pain and troubles of others. Wild animals were said to approach Vanka and eat out of his hands and pockets, feeling perfectly safe.

Perhaps it was his gift of sympathy that allowed him to see the ghost while he was working on the murals. Vanka usually painted at night, and he insisted that he not be disturbed. Even Father Zagar did not enter the church while the artist was painting. While on top of the scaffolding, Vanka began to hear noises from the church below. Initially he attributed them to his imagination, or normal noises that he was not yet accustomed to. On the fourth night of work, he looked down and saw a robed figure, making movements with its arms. Vanka thought Father Zagar had come in and was being silent as not to disturb him. He ignored the figure and went back to work, although he did notice that Father Zagar’s dogs began to bark loudly outside. Vanka finished his work and left the church around 2:00 A.M. Father Zagar had coffee and cake waiting for him. When asked about his whereabouts, Zagar said he had not gone into the church. Vanka did not put much more thought into the incident.

Several days went past before there was another occurrence. On the eighth night of work, around midnight, Maxo Vanka looked down from the scaffolding and saw the hooded man again. The strange figure was making gestures with his arms and mumbling as he walked up and down the aisle of the church. Vanka felt a strange chill rush over him as he hurried to finish his work. By the time he was done, around 12:30, the man had disappeared.

Immediately the artist headed for the rectory, where he found Father Zagar asleep. He had apparently been there for several hours. Vanka thought that the priest might be sleepwalking, but Zagar dismissed the idea. Then Zagar told Vanka about a story that had been circulating at the church for about 15 years. Several parishioners claimed to have
Catholic Ghost Stories Of Western Pennsylvania (continued)

had encounters with a ghostly figure in the church. There were even arguments about the nature and identity of the ghost, but no one had come to any real conclusion. Father Zagar had never personally seen the apparition. He had refrained from telling the story to Vanka because he was afraid that he would scare himself and fall from the scaffolding. The two then decided that at 11:00 each night Father Zagar would come into the church and stay with Vanka until he finished.

The next night, when the priest entered the church, he began to make jokes about the ghost. His jokes soon ceased when he and Vanka began to hear loud knocking sounds coming from the back of the church. Father Zagar walked towards the noise and said "If you're a ghost, if you're a dead man, go with God. Peace to you. I'll pray for you. Only, please don't bother us." Just then, Vanka saw the apparition materialize in the fourth pew. According to the artist he was an old man with a strange, angular face. Within seconds he had disappeared. Father Zagar had not seen the ghost and was still a bit skeptical. His skepticism disappeared later that night when he had gone to bed. He began to hear loud knocks in his own room, similar to the ones he had heard in the church. He also felt an unnerving chill and sensed the presence of a dead man. Zagar prayed for the ghost's soul and again asked him to allow Vanka to work in peace.

Several nights passed without incident, and Father Zagar began to believe that the ghost was honoring his request. Then the knocks started again. Zagar again went to the back of the church to investigate the noise. Vanka, who was still on the scaffolding, saw the ghost materialize in the aisle. The apparition proceeded up to the altar and the eternal flame. When he reached it, he blew it out then disappeared. The light had not been extinguished since the day it was lit eight years earlier and was surrounded by glass that protected it from the wind and from drafts. Father Zagar had not seen the ghost, but turned around in time to see the flame go out. From that time on he never doubted a word of Vanka's story.

The ghost continued to appear over the next few months while Vanka was working. The artist was often filled with feelings of dread and fear just before the ghost appeared. Sometimes the feelings were so strong that he fled the church. Vanka began stuffing his ears with cotton and covering his eyes with a cloud of smoke. Finally, he decided to stay and confront the ghost. He yelled down the steps "I'm coming to drive you out." The response just made the German priest angry, "You don't scare me." That response just made the German priest angry, and he charged down and grappled with the ghost, hurling the specter to the floor. Holy Water in hand, he dowsed the ghost and it vanished. The disturbances lessened after that.

In the mid-1850s, a highly educated doctor named Albert G. Walter built a two-story hospital on the bluff, once known as Boyd's Hill. Dr. Walter was an abolitionist and used his hospital as a stop on the Underground Railroad. There are actually two parts of the ghost story, both tied to the hospital. One account tells of an escaped slave who arrived in the middle of the night dressed in rags. He had been severely beaten, and still had part of his shackles attached to his arm and to an iron collar around his neck. By the time he had reached the hospital's doorstep, he was near death. Dr. Walter did his best to save him, but within a few hours he had died.

A few years later, the Civil War had begun and wounded soldiers and prisoners were being shipped to northern hospitals to recover. At least one, but probably several severely wounded Confederate prisoners were said to have been sent to Walter's hospital. Despite Dr. Walter's best efforts, he was not able to save all of them. Dr. Walter passed away in 1876. In 1882, the Holy Ghost Fathers purchased the old hospital on top of the bluff and used the site to construct "Old Main". Instead of demolishing the old hospital, they moved it to a lot they had purchased across the street and added another story. The expanded building, which was used as student housing, was first known as St. John's Hall, and later became St. Mary's Hall.

According to tradition, both locations were haunted. On stormy nights, on the bottom floors of Old Main and in the basement of the old hospital, it is said that the ghost of the escaped slave can be heard fighting the ghost of a dead Confederate soldier. According to a story in Duquesne Magazine in 1940, if the slave won there was no trouble, but if the soldier won there would be misery and woe. The story was so well known that it became part of a freshman initiation ritual in the early twentieth century. The freshman would be marched into the basement of the old hospital to hear the battle. If they did hear it, they were a member of the select few who could attend the university.

Initiation ritual aside, many strange events were reported at the hall over the years. Noises were heard, chains rattled and footsteps walked up and down the steps when no one was there. One night the ghosts were making so much noise in the basement of St. John's Hall that the men had had enough. A big German priest volunteered to go down to confront the ghost. He yelled down the steps "I'm coming to drive you out." The ghost answered, "Come ahead, I know all about you. You don't scare me." That response just made the German priest angry, and he charged down and grappled with the ghost, hurling the specter to the floor. Holy Water in hand, he dowsed the ghost and it vanished. The disturbances lessened after that.
While physically wrestling with a ghost seems like a tall tale, that story and the others serve several purposes. The tales recall the early and significant use of the site and building before it was part of the university. They also served to as a source of tradition and camaraderie among students who participated in the initiations in the basement. The German priest wrestling with and banishing the ghost can be seen as representing the triumph of faith in God over adversity. The Holy Ghost Fathers (now the Spiritans) faced and overcame many challenges in establishing the university and throughout the early years. Their faith was reflected in every aspect of the school, even its ghost stories. It is also interesting that the key component of the story relates to slavery and abolition, considering the Spiritan Order's strong ties with Africa.

By the early 1970s St. Mary's Hall was in bad shape and needed to be razed. With the old hospital gone, parts of the ghost story became associated with Old Main. The tale still serves as a connection to the physical and spiritual past of the University.

The Phantom at the Pond
La Roche College is a small liberal arts college located along Babcock Boulevard in the North Hills of Allegheny County. The school was founded in the early 1960s by the Sisters of Divine Providence. The sisters had the campus laid out and constructed on the land adjacent to their beautiful motherhouse. Originally, the college admitted only women, but by the 1970s men started attending the school, which is now known for its design programs. Since that time the college has developed and grown with the help of the sisters.

Like Duquesne, La Roche also has a few ghost stories that have circulated among its students. One unique story is centered on a shallow, man-made pond that is located along the road in front of the motherhouse. According to the legend, the shallow pond was still deep enough to claim the life of one of the nuns. One of the most commonly repeated versions of the story tells of a blind nun who decided to go out for a walk around the grounds one evening. Though she could not see, she was very familiar with the property and was comfortable walking on her own. As she passed the pond, something tragic happened. Somehow she slipped into the water, possibly hitting her head. Even though it was only a few feet deep, for some reason she was unable to get out. By the time the other sisters realized that she was missing it was too late. In the years since the drowning, students have reportedly seen the ghost of the nun repeating her tragic walk near the pond late at night.

The legend was so well known on campus that in October of 1996, a reporter for the La Roche Courier, the student newspaper, decided to investigate its origins. Jennifer Germeyer discovered that the legend of the drowned nun was based on a real event. On March 22, 1949, Sister Mercedes Michel went out for an early morning walk. She would never return to the convent. At 10:00 that same morning, her body was spotted in the pond by a man who was driving past. It was around the same time that some other nuns realized that she had not arrived at the Alpha School (which was run by the sisters) to perform her lunch duties. When the coroner examined her, he concluded that she had died of a heart attack and then fell into the pond. Sister Mercedes was known to have a very nervous personality, and she had been very worried about something in the days before her death. Whatever it was, the stress proved to be too much, and she would never complete her morning walk.

It is easy to see how the legend would be spawned from this event. The first students of the college in the 1960s were already hearing a second-hand retelling of the sister's death. Over the years details were embellished and the scene shifted from early morning to late at night. After all, a ghost story is always scarier at night. The legend of the ghostly nun kept alive the memory of the tragic accident in a slightly altered form. In a very indirect way, it also serves as a reminder of the sacrifices the Sisters of Divine Providence have made over the years to provide educational opportunities for others. Of course, for those who have claimed to have encountered the ghost over the years, the legend is much more than just a campus memory.

A Ghost in the Mill
For decade after decade, the economy of Western Pennsylvania was defined and driven by the steel industry. Mills lined the river valleys, smoke clouded the sky, and manufacturing was king. It was not uncommon to find two or three generations of a family working in a mill. Steel was as much a part of the region's identity as its rivers and its mix of ethnic peoples. It was the mills themselves, in fact, which were partially responsible for creating the region's multi-ethnic heritage by providing employment to immigrants, many of whom were Catholic. Those days of heavy industry have passed in this region, but the legends and memories of the mills have lived on. Like any other business or institution that is central to the lives of many people, the mills had their own set of folklore and superstitions. They also had a few ghost stories. My personal favorite is the story of the ghost of Jim Grabowski. Grabowski was from one of those Catholic immigrant families whose lives, and sometimes deaths, were tied to the mills. He was supposedly killed in an accident in Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation's Two Shop, once located on Pittsburgh's South Side.

According to the story, Jim Grabowski met his untimely demise one day in 1922 while working near a ladle full of dangerous molten steel. Grabowski tripped over a rigging hose and was not able to catch himself. He plunged head first into the ladle, and his entire body was melted into the steel. The custom at the time was to take such a ladle and bury it at the dumping ground near Hazelwood, as if you were putting a body in a grave. Sometimes a steel nugget from the vat would be given to the family of the worker. Apparently the ladle that entombed Grabowski never made it there, and sat around on the grounds Two Shop. Forty years later, after Two Shop was no longer used for making steel, some J&L workers cut into an old ladle of steel while they were working on another project. Some believed that when they did, they released Grabowski's ghost. After that, when workers would walk through the old Two Shop, they would report hearing Grabowski's ghostly screams, cries for help, and sometimes a "maniacal" laughter. Grabowski's ghost was known to be especially hostile to rigging crews who entered the building because he had tripped on one of their hoses. Allegedly some workers could even see an apparition of Grabowski gliding through the old shop.

George Swetnam, a local historian and folklorist, interviewed J&L workers about the ghost in 1970. One worker told him that about thirty percent of the guys working at that time believed in the ghost. He told Swetnam that during Two Shop's years of operation, from 1905 till 1960, between forty and fifty workers were killed there. The old worker speculated that Jim Grabowski may have just been a fictional character who was created as a representation of all the
deceased workers, but added that he was not working in the shop then so he did not know for sure. It is interesting that even at that point in time the worker realized that the story may have been a form of commemoration of the workers who had perished at Two Shop. The memory of their tragic deaths collectively kept alive through a representative story. Steel mill ghost stories served another purpose when the mills were still around. They were a reminder of the dangerous conditions that surrounded the workers and the need to be vigilant. Even the slightest misstep could result in tragedy. The dangers of the mill were always present in the lives of the Catholic and Orthodox immigrants who labored in them.

Swetnam also recorded two poems written about Grabowski's ghost when he was conducting the interviews. The first has been published in several places before, but I will include it here.

When you’re walking up through Two Shop
You'll know someone is around
If you hear a sort of clanking
And a hollow moaning sound
For the ghost of Jim Grabowski
Who was killed in ’22
Must forever walk through Two Shop
Which I will explain to you.
Jim fell into a ladle,
And they couldn't find a trace,
So they couldn't take the body
To a final resting place...
Yes there is a ghost in Two Shop;
I’ve seen the specter twice,
And you’ll stay away from there at night
If you heed my advice.

The second poem was probably written by the same person, but the workers never verified his identity. As far as I can tell, it only appeared in Swetnam’s original article from The Pittsburgh Press in 1970.

When I saw somebody moving
With a gliding sort of pace,
And my knees began to tremble,
For this creature had no face!
I was paralyzed with terror,
And I froze as in a dream,
But the creature went right past me,
And walked right through a beam....

Cries at the Black Cross
At the end of the First World War, a deadly plague swept the world. The 1918 influenza outbreak, also known as the Spanish Flu, ultimately caused many more deaths than the war itself. At least fifty million people were killed by the flu worldwide, and the number may have been as high as one-hundred million. Unlike other strains of influenza that tend to be fatal for those already sick, the old, or the very young, the Spanish Flu killed young adults who were otherwise healthy. It is believed that the cramped conditions and crowded hospitals that existed in Europe during the war allowed an already potent strain of the flu to mutate and became deadlier. Travel after the war spread the disease to the Americas and around the world. Soldiers returned home and carried the virus with them. Some regions had a mortality rate as high as 20%. In the United States, the flu may have killed as many as 675,000.

The Spanish Flu reached western Pennsylvania in September 1918. There were a few cases at first, but by October it was everywhere. Some communities were unable to cope with the large numbers of casualties. Sometimes dozens would die in a few days. Fearing the further spread of disease, authorities wanted the bodies buried quickly. It was not uncommon for mass graves to be used to cope with the problem.

Such was the case in West Winfield Township in Butler County. The township, which is located near the border with Armstrong County, was home to several small mining and manufacturing companies. Many of the people who lived in the area were immigrants, mostly Italian and eastern European, who had recently come to find work. When the flu swept the township and people began dying, there was often no family to claim the bodies. As a result, the community and business owners decided to bury the bodies in mass graves. Each grave at the makeshift cemetery officially held anywhere from one to five bodies. Several of the workers who hauled the bodies to the site and worked at the graves later reported as many as twenty bodies in each grave. At least three-hundred people died of the Spanish Flu in this part of Butler County, but it is not clear how many were buried in the mass graves.

A local priest from Coylesville felt that the immigrants deserved a proper burial service. Father O’Callahan had a large wooden cross constructed out of railroad ties and saw that it was placed at the gravesite. He also conducted a Catholic burial service at the grave for the hastily buried immigrants. The Cross that he had constructed, the “Black Cross”, marked the site for decades. The unusual grave became the center of many legends.

For years it has been reported that strange phenomena occur at the graves. One account insists that if you go to the burial site during a full moon, you will hear babies crying. Presumably they are flu victims who are buried at the site. Around October and November, the months when so many victims died, supernatural activity at the burial site increases. Strong winds seemingly blow out of nowhere. Some visitors have reported that the whole area will become extremely cold for several minutes. The most disturbing happening occurs when it is quiet. The voices of the buried immigrants can supposedly be heard talking in low muffled tones in their native tongues. The sound can be heard coming right out of the ground. Even the trees that surround the mass graves are reported to take on strange and menacing shapes late at night.

Eventually bad weather and vandalism destroyed the original wooden cross. In recent years the local community raised money to place a new burial marker next to the site of the old one. It was put in place in 2002. The graves are located near the intersection of Cornetti and Sasse Roads on property that belongs to the Armstrong Cement and Supply Company. A new historical marker was also placed at the gravesite by the Saxonburg District Woman’s Club to tell the story of
those buried there. It reads:

**Influenza Epidemic Victims**
Here are buried an unknown number of local victims of the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 – one of history's worst epidemics in terms of deaths. In Butler County, the worst period was early October to early November 1918, with some 260 deaths in the county seat alone. Immigrant workers in the limestone and other industries are buried in this cemetery, with one to five bodies in each grave. A large wooden cross long marked the site.

The ghost story associated with the Black Cross appeared to have passed its zenith years ago when the original cross had disappeared. The legend did not die, however, and recent events have brought new life to this ghost story. The combination of the new grave markers and media-driven scares of new epidemics from bird flu and swine flu have reinvigorated this legend. The current flu scares have been accompanied by numerous comparisons to the 1918 epidemic as a worst-case scenario. This haunting resonates with young people today because it links the supernatural with a frightening contemporary threat. Most of the people buried in the gravesite were young themselves. It is both a lesson in history and a reminder that epidemics are not just a thing of the past, but something that can reoccur in the future. Even the young cannot escape death if it is their time. The young immigrants may have been forgotten if not for the initial efforts of Father O'Callahan, but now their legend connects them to the present.

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Duquesne University Administration Building (Old Main) and St. Mary's Hall (early 1940s), both allegedly haunted.

Courtesy: Duquesne University Archives.