

The Legend of Giovanna

Reputed

Dance Hall Ghost of Wells, Nevada

by Gene Kaplan and Peg Kaplan
Wells, Nevada

**Ghost or Guardian Angel?
How much Fact? How much
Fantasy?**

**A Study Of Regional Oral Tradition
Otherwise Known
as the Haunted History of
Humboldt Wells**

Walk out from Wells two miles in any direction on a warm summer night and see countless stars. It's easy to imagine this fierce proud land 100 years ago, 200 years ago. And there are some who claim they hear more than an occasional coyote wail in the darkness, hear voices, see apparitions from the past. Amidst the sage it could be 2002, 1902, or 1802, the land indifferent to such a small matter as human chronology. Of the many feet that have trod it, echoes remain. And on a warm summer night you can hear those echoes and feel a shimmer of their passing.

The vastness of the region can cause people to color in companions be they from the past or present. That's why the cowboy sings. To date, none of those ghosts, if they are that, have been malevolent. No harm has come to anyone who reported seeing them or hearing them, but astounding well-documented discoveries have been attributed to visitations from what folks hereabouts call "the other side."

Research is hindered by the reluctance of people to admit to a paranormal experience because any such a report



is greeted by skeptics whistling the *Outer Limits* theme. People were less skeptical around the turn of the Twentieth Century when many learned and scientific experts voiced a belief in spiritualism and the presumption that the living can communicate with the other side. As late as the 1920's Arthur Conan Doyle, by profession a physician, and by avocation an author and creator of Sherlock Holmes, publicly spoke out as to his belief in spiritualism. Dr. Doyle explained that in his own lifetime he'd witnessed the coming of electric light, the telephone, radio, heavier

than air flight that could cross the Atlantic Ocean. In a time of so many wonderful inventions and discoveries, Dr. Doyle asked could anyone really be sure scientific proof of spiritualism wasn't just around the corner?

True or not, stories of the haunts of Humboldt Wells persist. You can seldom get anyone to come forward so great is the reluctance of long-time residents to expose themselves to ridicule, but the consensus is her name was Giovanna. Giovanna is remembered, and her life is legend.

Disputed Giovanna Origins

Description of any mythic figure presents a unique challenge for the historian, particularly when the threshold question is, as with Robin Hood, "Did the beloved folk hero really exist?" Suffice to say the problem is compounded by alleged paranormal sightings. Giovanna is believed to have lived a life that up to a point was a typical old west story of tragedy and hardship. She was already an orphan on the day in 1870 when a Shoshone band paid a visit on the Wells postmaster. Cutting juniper fence posts for ranchers, the Shoshone found the little girl a few miles outside of town, exhausted, bare feet shredded by running over broken ground. All she had in the world hung from her neck in a knotted sock by a rawhide thong — the contents of which she refused to reveal. She described the murder of her mother, father, and infant sister and her own escape when she cut

loose a horse and rode for her life until the steed was shot out from under her.

Searchers found no trace of the family wagon, or other family members. After that Giovanna never again spoke of her childhood except to confirm her family were Italian and that was the language she could best speak as a child. Fortunately for the orphan girl the Wells area had a sizeable Italian-American community, ranchers, bronc busters, railroad men, merchants, who kicked in to board the waif at a convent-run school in San Francisco.

Giovanna came back to Wells speaking fluent English, passable Chinese. An inspired violinist and flute player she was also a proficient piano player and boarded with a succession of ranchers, imparting to ranch children her love of music and doing her best not to call undue attention to what for her time were highly unusual personal habits. Wiry, 5 foot 7 inches, brown eyes, with waist length brown hair, she devoted her free time to walks across the open range clad in buckskin over a faded shirt, rucksack, Levi's, moccasins in an era when society frowned on women wearing trousers. In her rucksack she carried a lariat and halter. Sometimes she'd jog out as far as endurance permitted, slip a halter on a grazing horse, vault onto its bare back and ride miles back to the ranch before releasing the steed. No side saddle for Giovanna! The girl could ride but wouldn't accept a riding invitation unless her host acquiesced to her riding astride.

Unusual Behavior for 1890's

Giovanna's cross-country jogs put distance between herself and her ranch hosts so she could engage in unobserved practice of other unlady-like pursuits, dropping a long rope over anything that walked, throwing a slender knife fashioned from a worn-

out file into tree stumps, hurling rocks at tin can targets. One rancher swore he'd crested a hill, caught Giovanna unaware and actually witnessed her lasso an antelope on the run. No one who knew Giovanna ever called that rancher a liar.

The word "weird" began to crop up in discussions of Giovanna's habits. A cowboy out at first light looking for strays up a Thousand Springs creek bed was startled to find her crouched motionless on an embankment where she could get a good look at any passing rider's face.

Wells folks then and now respect education, love music, and are tolerant of different ways so Giovanna did well enough boarding out until she turned twenty-six and took a Bulls Head room in town. At that stage in her career she had interests only the town of Wells could satisfy. She (forgive the phrase) haunted the stockyards watching whenever an outfit drove in a herd and habitually materialized at the depot ostensibly clutching a railroad schedule as if waiting to greet someone, but in reality scrutinizing the face of every man who dismounted the cars. Whenever there was a Chinese marriage, party, funeral, she played her flute and violin and regularly visited every Chinatown storekeeper, apparently always asking the same questions. Whatever she wanted the Chinese wouldn't reveal and Giovanna wouldn't acknowledge.

Becomes Dance Hall Musician

It didn't hurt Giovanna's community reputation when she strolled through the Bulls Head or San Marin dining room or SP Café playing fiddle tunes for tips, but playing piano for bars and dance halls was another matter. Fiddling at Annie's Sporting House across the tracks was worse yet, but the fact was wherever the rough men of the frontier gathered, there Giovanna went, her music mak-

ing her welcome, the music supporting her with tips, the music enabling her to get a close look at men's faces.

Giovanna spent a lot of time talking to cowhands, teamsters, asking who worked where, how long, with who. She memorized and organized the trivia into a mental jigsaw puzzle of men on the range methodically groping for missing pieces. "That girl's looking for something," folks usually said and let it go at that. Her quest consumed all her free time and was to her more important than the round of parties and dances at which cowboys and ranchers sons courted young ladies. The talk of the county in her early twenties, Giovanna rebuffed all suitors and by the time she turned thirty was regarded as a dedicated spinster — an old maid.

By 1897 Giovanna's life had settled into a predictable routine: she played piano until the Bulls Head bar patrons drifted away and the bar was empty. Then no matter the time of year or how late at night she'd go to her room and change into buckskin, Levi's, then slip downstairs, step through the Bulls Head west wall door closest to the tracks, make her way to the railroad right of way, and walk. She returned hours later, usually after dawn. Bulls Head tenants out on the balcony for a cigar or breath of fresh air said most times she walked until she disappeared into the night, but sometimes she'd only walk as far as the edge of Chinatown and with the stockyards and roundhouse on one side, Chinatown on the other, she'd sit on a crate alongside the tracks playing her flute.

Killing Begins

Then the killing began. The first body was found face up — if a decapitated corpse can be described as "face up" — near O'Neil Basin. Neck neatly severed, wrists tied with rawhide to stout wooden pegs. A pool

of blood seeping into the ground indicated it had taken the man a long time to die after his shirt was sliced clear of his left arm and a vein opened up. The dead embers of a camp fire, a fire-hardened sharp stick, and multiple burn marks indicated he hadn't slipped away peacefully. The man's possessions were mostly there, but bits had been taken or cut off. Beside the corpse were the bridle, saddle blanket, and saddle of the mount the cowhand drew from the Remuda the last morning he was seen alive. The horse was found grazing five miles north of Wells. The bosses didn't want to make a big thing of it, didn't want law nosing around the spread, didn't want to scare off good hands. The deceased wasn't much of a buckaroo anyway. Just released from prison after a long stretch for robbery. Trailside judgment was he wouldn't be missed. So the headless body was buried, the rancher kicking dirt over the embers and an unfamiliar geometric design surrounding the fire set out with pieces of colored glass. Hired hands were told to keep quiet about it, but word did spread.

There was evidence of a later disappearance that could have been another similar killing when a bridle, saddle blanket, and saddle were found in a neat pile encircled by what the round-up cook called glass beads. Again, the mount turned up miles away, but no body was ever found. At the time, it wasn't unusual for a drifter to sign on, work a round-up, then disappear, and again the cowhand gone missing was a recently released ex-con.

Deadly Confrontation

Then a vile, violent man came to Wells by train one day, walked from the depot to the Bulls Head, checked in and started drinking. Eliphalet Jones was how he introduced himself, planting himself at a poker table in the Bulls Head Saloon. Almost elder-

ly, he claimed he'd been an Indian fighter and prospector who'd stashed a "pretty big stake quite a while back." Drinking steadily he got louder and louder, unconcerned by his unbroken losing streak. Drunk, he confided he'd just been released from prison after serving twenty-five years for a "misunderstanding" over an Army payroll, but he wasn't complaining "cause they'd have stretched me if they knew who they really had." He asked the whereabouts of a Peter Haws, once a Clover Valley rancher then named two cellmate friends he'd promised to meet who "were sprung earlier" having received lesser sentences for the same crime that sent him to prison. The barroom fell silent at mention of Haws, not seen in or about the valley for twenty-seven years. Despised by neighbors because he was believed to have raided emigrant wagons with renegade Indians, Haws had few friends, and those he did have weren't any more popular than he was. The silence was shattered by piano music, loud, repetitive when Giovanna transitioned from a Stephen Foster tune to pound out *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, pounding the upright as never before. The music broke the stillness, men began to move around, distancing themselves from the poker game and the man who claimed to be a friend of the despised Peter Haws. Men whispered, exchanging glances, recognizing the names of the ex-cons as the dead man up north to the O'Neil Basin and the cowpoke gone missing on last year's round-up.

"Barkeep, set 'em up," Eliphalet shouted after losing 30 dollars betting two pair against a flush. *Thirty Dollars!* Back then \$30 was a month's cowpoke pay. Hovering over the table, bottle in hand, the Bulls Head bartender fixed a wordless stare on Eliphalet, the meaning clear enough, "Can you pay?"

"Lots of gold for drinks, drinks on the house," Eliphalet shouted while shaking out over the green baize a leather poke with dirt breaking from the crevices. There followed the tinkle of silver and the authoritative clink of gold coins. Inspecting the hoard the barkeep counted out the price and poured whiskey allowing "Don't see many of these silver three cent pieces in these parts any more."

"Them Double Eagles all the same date?" the gambler who won the previous hand asked after poking at the twenty dollar gold coins with the butt of a Marsh-Wheeling cigar.

"My deal, if you're ready" the gambler said.

"Born ready," Eliphalet responded, wiping his face with a handkerchief, then fishing from his vest a key-wound gold watch suspended by a thick gold chain which boasted a winding key and a small gold locket set with a purple stone serving as a watch fob. "Still keeps time," he muttered "even after sitting in prison storage so many years." Eliphalet anted, opened, then drew one card, closing his hands over the pasteboards as he appeared to check out the new addition to his hand. "Raise you," he challenged nonchalantly flipping two Double Eagles into the pot, squealing like a pig when seven inches of razor sharp steel anchored his palm to the table. Giovanna closed the distance to the table, retrieved her knife to position its tip at Eliphalet's throat, and with her left hand lifted the man's bloody fingers from the pasteboards. Six cards told the story. The Jack, Ten, Deuce, and Ace of Diamonds, the Queen of Diamonds, and the Ten of Clubs that Eliphalet was dealt on the draw and had yet to dispose of after substituting in his red queen. Tears on her face Giovanna slapped the man twice, pivoted, walked out. That ended the

card game but accelerated Eliphalet's drinking.

Another Mysterious Disappearance

At midnight Eliphalet bedded down, his Bulls Head room overlooking Front Street. Eliphalet locked his door and be it due to caution or fear pulled the dresser across the door to block it. The next morning while airing bedding over the balcony rail the maid noticed curtains flapping from the open window and realized the locked room was empty. Tongues wagged. The town constable pointed to what could have been a rope groove burned into the balcony rail. A search of Front Street below resulted in a happy eight-year-old boy finding the gold key-wound watch and chain pushed just under the protective edge of the boardwalk. The boy was even happier when no one came forward to claim it. The watch was still running, but the locket was gone. It was all most peculiar but there really wasn't evidence of a crime and on top of the dresser was a Double Eagle and the room key, not in itself an unusual way to settle up for an early riser except for the multi-colored glass beads forming a perimeter around the twenty dollar gold piece. The hotel kept the room vacant until the paid-up ran out. Talk died down. Neither hide nor hair of Eliphalet was seen again. At least not alive.

Tragic Romance

Giovanna's nocturnal walks ceased after Eliphalet's disappearance as did her penchant for Levi's and buckskin. She was occasionally heard laughing. Love came when she met a cavalry Captain who frequently visited Wells to buy horses for the United States Army. He was a career soldier, proud of it, and had an excellent reputation for fair dealing with ranchers. Then came the Spanish-American War. The peculiar thing about the death of Giovanna's fiancée was after he passed none of his many friends and

acquaintances in northeastern Nevada could remember his name or his face. Several ranchers swore that on documents he had signed on behalf of the Army the ink had faded so that his signature was no longer legible. Others swore their receipts just disappeared. Giovanna coped with his death by donning black head to toe, spending hours playing military songs over and over again on the Bulls Head piano, spending hours playing Dvorak's *From The New World* on her violin, playing *From The New World* in the dining room of the San Marin and Nevada Hotel over and over even after dinner patrons cleared out to catch trains, or get on with business. The guests liked it well enough for her to earn her board and meals which is just as well for she never again felt up to teaching music. And her walking resumed.

Giovanna Disappears

A few years after the turn of the century came the night when Giovanna walked east. That was the last night she was ever seen alive. There was no reason to suspect the clear winter night would drop to less than 6 below. Tracks gleamed in the moonlight and to either side miles and miles of glistening snow. About an hour after Giovanna left town the temperature dropped and the wind picked up gusting to over 40 miles per hour whipping the blizzard into a white-out. It got so cold the bulb on the thermometer screwed to the wall of the railroad depot burst and cattle froze to death in the fields. When Giovanna was absent from her piano stool the next day search parties set out. They looked again when spring came and the snow melted but found no body or other trace of the woman.

The Shoshone had found Giovanna alone walking outside of Wells when she was a child and as an adult she disappeared walking east and was never seen alive again. When the county Sheriff asked if any of

those who knew the missing lady had a recent photograph, residents dug out pictures of wedding dances in which they just knew Giovanna was in the background with the musicians only to find empty space where they remembered the missing woman had stood. Soon things got really strange.

The Legend of the Visits of Giovanna from the "Other Side"

Dancer was seven years old in 1904, pure white, and weighed 16 pounds. He wasn't called "Dancer" at the time, and to the degree anyone needed to refer to him as more than "Here Kitty-Kitty" he was known as the Bulls Head cat. It was six minutes before midnight the hot August night when he lost a mouse track behind the depot and sniffed the air. Hopeless, Dancer concluded. He decided to trot on home, cutting across Front Street and on to the boardwalk to go into the Bulls Head Saloon. It was then he paused, registered recognition, and backed onto Front Street. This is known because two buckaroos and a railroad fireman were perched on packing crates in front of Fisher's Saloon and saw the show start to finish. Dancer took more steps backwards, then cocked his head listening and reared up into a sitting position thrusting his forepaws skyward, swaying from side to side. Then he began to mew.

"Holy cow, he's dancing" the rail-roader exclaimed.

"Singing too, it seems like," a cowpoke contributed. The taller cowpoke nodded, took a pull from a hip flask, nodded again.

"Sounds like *The Battle Cry of Freedom*," the tall cowpoke opined. "Hadn't figured that cat for a Yankee!"

The Bulls Head crowd emptied into the street joined by tipplers from

other saloons down the row who wanted to see the cat who sang and danced. Soon the crowd was startled beyond words because now everyone could hear music. The piano player who had come out on the street looked back into the Bulls Head where unseen hands pounded out the refrain on the upright piano he'd abandoned moments before. Dancer accompanied the unseen musician with caterwauling that if translated into human would probably have said this:

Yes, we'll rally 'round the flag, boys,
We'll rally once again,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom,
We will rally from the hillside,
We'll gather from the plain,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

Our country forever,
Hurrah, boys, hurrah!
Down with the traitor!
Up with the star;
While we rally 'round the flag, boys,
Let's rally once again,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

We are springing to the call
Of the loyal, true and brave,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.
And our battle cry shall be:
"Not one man shall be a slave!"
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

Our country forever,
Hurrah, boys, hurrah!
Down with the traitor!
Up with the star;
While we rally 'round the flag, boys,
Let's rally once again,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

We are springing to the call
Of our brothers gone before,
Ans'wring the battle cry of freedom.
And we'll fill the vacant ranks
With a million free men more,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.
Our country forever,
Hurrah, boys, hurrah!
Down with the traitor!

Up with the star;
For while we rally 'round the flag,
boys,
Let's rally once again,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

Our country forever
Hurrah, boys, hurrah!
So down with the traitor!
And up with the star!
For we know while freedom lives,
Not a man must be a slave!
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

Keen-eyed men could see from the Bulls Head doorway that keys were moving as if on a player piano, but none chose to make a closer inspection, not even the Colonel who'd survived a war and was generally regarded as fearless. When the piano fell silent Dancer dropped to all fours, scooted between the Colonel's legs into the Bulls Head Saloon and made a beeline for the piano. Sniffing twice, Dancer leapt onto the stool, purred awhile and went to sleep. The uneasiness of the crowd was compounded by the knowledge that Giovanna had been a special friend of the Bulls Head cat, always setting out little treats for him on top of the piano.

"Do you doubt it? Just ask anyone who was there," Bulls Head regulars proclaimed for years afterwards, pointing to the pure white 16 pound tom cat curled up on the bar or piano. Undoubtedly Dancer remembered the night vividly. But being a cat Dancer couldn't talk or explain who or what he saw.

Giovanna's Door

The night after Dancer got his name the bartender was understandably edgy, jumping when the Bulls Head's Lake Avenue door closest to the tracks blew open on a still night, then slammed shut. Peculiar thing, Dancer was pawing at the door just before it opened, then started ecstati-

cally purring like he'd seen a long lost friend. That cat and that door did the same the next night after most of the bar patrons cleared out, then nothing for three months, then nine nights in a row. It went on like that not really a predictable pattern, but frequent enough to cause talk. The anniversary of Giovanna's disappearance the Bulls Head began to fill up, an unnatural silence settling over the guests. At precisely 2:00 a.m. the clock struck the hour. Dancer leapt down from the bar trotting over to the west wall door just as it swung open then closed with a muffled thump. Purring, Dancer walked to the piano stool, surveyed the crowd with disdain, leapt upon the stool, then leapt on top the upright and curled up purring. The men in the bar looked at one another, all reluctant to speak their minds in that bar in front of that cat. In unison the men rose to walk out on the street for a hasty consultation. They were calling it Giovanna's door and no one was comfortable sitting next to it.

Then came piano music: *The Battle Cry of Freedom* followed by *From The New World* spilling out the Bulls Head open Front Street door into the street. Inside the saloon piano keys were mysteriously moving; Dancer on his hind paws on top the upright gyrating to the music and mewling out a vocal accompaniment.

The men had had enough. The details of the agreement reached are lost to history, but an apparent result was the next morning workmen moved the massive mahogany bar and back-bar from one side of the Bulls Head to the other, backing it up against and concealing that mysterious west wall door. Later, for reasons also lost to history the outside of the door was bricked shut. Time passed, eventually the very fact of the existence of the door was disputed. And even if there had at one time

been an egress exactly where the old timers remembered, could it really be Giovanna's door?

In the years after Giovanna's door was blocked Dancer enjoyed a full life and all the attention deserved by a celebrity, presiding over the Bulls Head from his perch on the bar or upright piano like an infinitely wise magistrate who had done it all, seen it all. Fortunately for the Bulls Head occupancy rate when a piano player stepped away from the upright it fell silent. Still there was restlessness. Tenants reporting flute music drifting in through open windows on late summer nights. Although Chinese residents of Wells wouldn't discuss the matter they routinely left offerings of food, oranges, on the packing box where Giovanna had sat, and when the packing box weathered to the point of collapse, another box took its place, ornamented with red paint and gold metal foil. The tradition continued until the Chinese all died or moved away and Chinatown crumbled.

Angel in the Snow

Legend has it that in 1914 a surveying party bound for Bishop Creek got caught in a blizzard and broke their Model T Ford's back axle desperately trying to make it to shelter. In the white-out the men could see nothing but one swore he heard a flute improvising *The Battle Cry of Freedom* and slogged off towards the music, the others following. The music only stopped when the half frozen men staggered into the Bulls Head where, according to local legend, the bartender was waiting with blankets and hot buttered rum.

"Never been a horse that can't be rode, never a cowboy that can't be thrown" it's said, so a nineteen year old wrangler wasn't surprised when a half-broke Mustang shied and threw him head first into a pile of rocks,

snickered and headed back to the corral. The wrangler blacked out, slipped into delirium, blacked out again, later swearing he could hear music, flute music, then woke up to find his broken leg wrapped and splinted, a half empty bottle of laudanum, and two oranges. Oranges. Back then many cowboys had never even seen an orange. How do you explain that?

In the Nineteen Twenties the silent classic *The Iron Horse* screened at the Nevada Hotel. It was a long movie for the day, interrupted by intermission. That Friday night – family night – a father was telling his family and the piano player *The Iron Horse* depiction of a Caucasian renegade in Indian guise had a grain of truth and Clover Valley rancher Peter Haws was widely believed to have preyed on emigrants. Just then the piano sprang to life to beat out a rousing elegant melody the piano player recognized as Dvorak's *From The New World*, but by then folks in Wells had other things and three skulls to talk about.

The Dream and the Discovery

Mention of dream analysis is sure to set off skeptics, however extensive research has been conducted by reputable universities into the origin of dreams; their significance in the function of the human brain. Mainstream media such as *Psychology Today* have published articles concerning dream research experiments in which one research assistant concentrated on an image while another research assistant was sleeping in an adjoining room. The finding was a higher than random incidence of the sleeping subject awaking and reporting dreams containing recognizable elements related to the image upon which the awake research assistant concentrated. Few psychologists want the notoriety which dream findings can generate – it can be as horrendous and

career-damaging as reporting a UFO – but there does appear to be a cautious acknowledgement of the possibility that a sleeping human being can experience dreams influenced by a phenomenon that could be categorized as telepathy. Do you believe that? If so, and if you want to keep a mainstream job and reputation, keep it to yourself.

In Wells in 1926 there was a second-generation woman of the west who had a dream, and to her later regret talked about it. The woman and her husband were ranch managers of the Dominic Quilici spread just west of Wells. She was a wife, mother, an intelligent individual with no eccentricities. She wasn't a fortune teller, never saw a UFO, and never made any claim about her dream other than admitting she had it and later made an astounding discovery.

As regional author Jean McElrath was to report in her *Aged in Sage*, it was September 1926 when "a black shrouded figure intruded on a woman's dream to stand beside her bed. Time passed while the shrouded spectre silently held indecipherable papers toward her, then faded with the dream into the night." The Wells woman wasn't frightened, and as a second generation of her family on the northeastern Nevada frontier there wasn't much that *could* frighten her, but she was a person who could recall the dreams which scrolled through her somnolent hours. After three days she gave in to a stirring, an instinct, and walked toward Willow Creek Canyon going further from the ranch house than ever before, striding into country unknown to her and avoided by local buckaroos. She had never been in the rocky, narrow canyon where according to McElrath, reliable witnesses said horses balked at going further and dogs growled and whined, yet the woman was undeterred. Hiking beyond a stand of willows at

the canyon mouth, she came to a halt and sat abruptly on a boulder near the cliff.

“Something just told me to sit,” she afterwards explained to Jean McElrath. Beside a creek, beside a trail traveled by Indians, emigrants, and soldiers there was a mass of shale and boulders and it was there she saw it.

A skull lay within reach of her hand – a human skull. She did not touch it. Walking back towards her ranch house she sent word to her husband who soon chugged up in their Model T and heard his wife describe the discovery. Bearing a shovel he and his wife walked back to the canyon. It was late afternoon when they reached the skull. The husband commenced digging in the immediate vicinity, unearthing \$3.75 in silver coins dated 1864 to 1868, hundreds of glass beads, red, green, blue, amber. More excavation revealed a rusted rifle, bullets, a single baby shoe, a gold locket set with a garnet and two more human skulls!

Three Skull Mystery is National News

The *Elko Daily Free Press* for September 29, 1926, headlined the front page story “Queer Dream Leads to Discovery which is Mystery Shrouded” and said the “queer dream” had “aroused curiosity” around Wells. It accurately detailed the three skulls, the rifle and bullets, the silver coins but added items the couple never saw. It did not mention the beads, and it left out the baby shoe and locket. The Free Press noted in regard to the skulls that “the dream which led to their discovery has been vouched for by many prominent citizens” of Wells. The story concluded “The find is one of the queerest which has ever been made in this county and the surrounding incidents read more like fiction than truth.”

Newspapers across the country had a field day livening up their accounts with embellishments including human skeletons, treasure maps, and buried treasure. The reports of human skeletons were off base, because no such remains were found to go with the heads. There was a skeleton, but it was that of a horse.

The sensational news generated a horde of treasure hunters prompting ranch owner Dominic Quilici to post an armed guard to protect his canyon property. Quilici was a merchant as well as a rancher, and in response to regional interest he displayed most of the artifacts and the three skulls in the window of his Wells mercantile store.

In time, interest in the display diminished and the objects were stored to make way to showcase merchandise. When the store changed hands the skulls went missing

Newspapers kept the story circulating for months and the *Elko Free Press* for December 13, 1926 got additional mileage out of the discovery with an item headlined “Dream Skulls, they are There.— Woman Finds Skeletons through Vision” and mused “Do the dead come to us with messages in our dreams? ... The discovery was made through a dream ... She dreamed that ... at the base of a rocky wall in a canyon just back of the ranch ... the remains of a number of dead persons would ... be found there.” The story presented direct quotes attributed to the Wells woman, who according to the *Elko Free Press* said:

“The dream was so vivid it made me restless, I could not forget it. I finally went to the place I dreamed of ... I uncovered a human skull.”

A subsequent ranch manager dynamited the cliff at the mouth of Willow Creek Canyon sealing the discovery

site and obliterating some of the trail.

Thirty-six years after the discovery regional author Jean McElrath interviewed the couple in a bid to sift the facts from newspaper embellishments before including the story in McElrath’s forthcoming book *Aged in Sage*. There were so many questions that could have been asked and perhaps answered, but even then after so many years the woman was highly offended at how she’d been portrayed by the media and had little to say about the “spectre,” not a word as to its sex, apparent age, or shrouded black attire.

The scientific community usually operates in isolation from believers in the paranormal, while those who believe in the possibility of ghosts often taint their own case by blending wishful thinking and publicity tricks into actual occurrences that could have a paranormal explanation. Study of the field is further hampered by derisive laughter and media lampooning that embarrasses and insults anyone who comes forward with an experience that could have scientific significance. And so it was media coverage of this well-documented discovery by a respected woman who never in her life could be described as unreliable caused her to clam-up leaving so many questions unanswered. Could the “spectre” have been Giovanna? We’ll never know.

The El Rancho Sighting

The day in 1953 when the Korean War truce was declared, a well-respected person who declined to be named was tending bar at the El Rancho. The two events actually had nothing to do with each other until an infantry Platoon Sergeant swung down from an evening train hefted his duffel bag and made a beeline for the El Rancho. Dumping the bag he asked for a room and a drink, receiving the key to Corner Room 6 with its

excellent view of the Bulls Head. He also received a straight up double shot of Jack Daniels. Then another. Then another. He was on convalescent leave from Letterman Army Hospital at the Presidio, San Francisco.

Tippling the shot glasses with his left hand the Platoon Sergeant had a story to tell. It wasn't about bugles, the strike of mortar rounds exploding into blossoms of flame in the night, M-1 rifles freezing shut, or men bayoneted in sleeping bags because they had been more afraid of freezing to death than the enemy. As a soldier he'd faced that and more. He hadn't been afraid to die, but he was afraid to come home. He'd been offered a battlefield commission as a Second Lieutenant the night before he was hit, an offer still open in the unlikely event he recovered full use of his right arm.

For the Platoon Sergeant, drinks were free that night. Leo Quilici, Builder/owner of the El Rancho was intensely patriotic and had a soft spot for servicemen. Leo himself was a U.S. Army veteran and served in the trenches in the First World War. He'd eye a soldier's ribbons, and serve refreshment accordingly. God help the bartender who let a G.I. reach into his pocket when Leo wanted the drinks on the house. The Platoon Sergeant kept offering a silver dollar, the bartender kept passing it back. Between drinks, after his third drink, the Platoon Sergeant used his left hand to lift his useless right hand onto the bar and commenced to unsuccessfully try to pick up the silver dollar with stiff, unresponsive fingers.

The barkeep had listened to the story about twenty-six times before he closed the bar and walked the soldier up to Corner Room 6. "Maybe I can help Dad on the ranch," the Platoon Sergeant kept repeating while climbing the stairs. But that

was the night before. The next morning the clean-up crew thought they heard flute music; so did guests coming down from rooms 5, 4, and 3.

That morning the bartender was in early conducting inventory and polishing glassware when the Platoon Sergeant bounded down the steps into the bar and ordered coffee, insisting he'd pay. "Watch this," he said, flexing his right hand, flipping and catching a silver dollar he passed to the astounded mixologist. Then the Platoon Sergeant set ten silver dollars on the bar, shuffling them like cards with the nimble fingers of his right hand. He'd put the crippling wound behind him and was headed back to Presidio of San Francisco to claim his commission and Army career. He had a night he'd love to tell about but it just wouldn't do to have come so far towards a commission and screw it up with a "Section 8" discharge after saying he'd seen a ghost.

Then he told his story on the condition the bartender would never repeat it, never let on to what happened. And that bartender kept his word. Bits and pieces were overheard by a waitress, enough to know the story was about a woman, but no more. Years after that regulars who'd met the Platoon Sergeant the night before and shook his hand the next day pestered the barkeep with questions. Was it Giovanna? But the bartender, always mindful an officer's reputation was at stake, would neither confirm nor deny and kept his vow of silence.

Railroad Presence Declines in Wells but Mysterious Music Still Heard

Years passed. The Nevada Hotel went vacant, then was boarded up. Even the venerable Bulls Head fell into disrepair, ground floor windows boarded up, second story windows broken out. The boards of the original balcony overlooking Front Street

deteriorated and were taken down denying tenants an opportunity to run their fingers over the groove in the balcony rail and scrawl tall tales about the Dance Hall Ghost on post-cards mailed back home.

There were recurring tales told by tenants of nearby residential hotels who say they sometimes saw a large white cat picking through the weeds behind the shuttered buildings of Front Street. Some say that cat is still seen and those stories are still told.

Reports of flute music have also been persistent, as has the wind. Yet children out for walks on warm summer nights who claim they hear the music sometimes come home inexplicably able to whistle recognizable excerpts from Dvorak's *From The New World*, music not frequently encountered by kids too young to drive. Across the tracks teamsters pulling their eighteen-wheeler rigs away from Donna's Ranch (self-identified as Nevada's Oldest Brothel and formerly known as Annie's Sporting House) have a unique view of Front Street from their elevated driver's seats. Many claim to have seen the ephemeral figure of a slender woman standing back from a second story window of the Nevada Hotel too far back in the room to be observed from the sidewalk.

A local artist sketched an impression of a slender dance hall girl leaning over the rail of a balcony over Front Street. In fact, no one has alleged Giovanna ever wore dance hall attire, quite the opposite. No doubt the artist was only giving expression to a local legend, accurate except for the attire, but could the artist have seen more?

And again, the music. Some claim the piano music, flute music, violin music drifting onto Front Street is no more than the jukebox in the Old

West Saloon, audible on hot summer nights when the rear door opening onto John Quilici Lane is left open for ventilation. No more than that. But how many years since the Old West Saloon had a functioning piano? And when, if ever, was *The Battle Cry of Freedom* or Dvorak's *From The New World* on that jukebox?

A Wells native whose folks go back three generations believes the Old Town has a life of its own, explaining "My granddad was an old-time gambler who owned and ran a Wells casino. They say he won a casino in a high stakes poker game that brought people from all over to play. Many of the stories Grandad told were about Wells in the old days when Front Street was full of people and casinos had live bands and were packed.

"When you walk through the old town you can feel it's alive. Something of those people is still there talking to you. I can hear them talking, laughing, dancing."

It's been reported that in 2001 a team of Canadian ghost hunters stalked Front Street, staking out the Bulls Head at 2:00 a.m. on several hot August nights. One night they indeed heard music, haunting, beautiful, perfectly capturing the spirit of the American west. Realizing the music came from Lake Avenue they made their way to the El Rancho, tape recording music flowing from the balcony of the historic hotel. Their elation faded the next morning when they learned the El Rancho was again occupied and a stereo had been playing the music of Aaron Copeland followed by a flick of the changer to spin Dvorak's *From The New World*. In their disappointment they neglected to ask the date when the stereo owners moved in or reveal the date when they first heard music in the street. Another mystery?

Trail's End

Was it not Shakespeare who observed "There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy"? Is there a Ghost of Humboldt Wells?

These sighting stories are representative of oral tradition but who can say what personal experiences inspired them? This much is known. When the wind blows and the snow falls there are songs on the wind in Wells. And as of press time, no one has conclusively proven that the Ghost of Humboldt Wells *does not* exist.

Wells Buildings Played a Part in Giovanna Legend

Several buildings in Old Town Wells are alleged to be haunts of Giovanna, the Dance Hall Ghost of Wells. Their general characteristics described herein.

Bulls Head

One of the most photographed, sketched, and asked about buildings in Old Town is the Bulls Head Saloon-Hotel. Opening as the town's first tavern on Christmas 1869, the crude log cabin gave way to ever larger and elegant structures. Elko County's first Sheriff J.B. "Ben" Fitch gave up law enforcement and after becoming a saloon and hotel operator, restaurateur, partnered with cattle king Colonel E.P. Hardesty to put up a structure in Wells that merited the attention of the Elko Independent for September 18, 1887:

"Under the head of New Today will be found the announcement of grand opening of the Bull's Head hotel at Wells. This elegant building has just been completed ... and is undoubtedly entitled to the proud distinction of being one of the finest hotels in the state. As an appropriate ceremony in the formal opening of this magnificent house the manager, Mr.

J.B. Fitch ... has determined to give a grand ball which should eclipse anything heretofore attempted in the way of entertainment at Wells."

Fitch made good on his pledge to throw a memorable opening bash inviting one and all by running an invitational ad in the Elko Independent:

"Grand Ball and Opening of the Bull's Head Hotel at Wells, Nevada Oct. 5, 1887.

The undersigned announces that he will spare neither pains nor expense in making this ball A GRAND SUCCESS. The music will be the best that can be procured in the state, musicians from Reno, Carson, and Elko being already engaged. The dancing hall is 30 by 75 feet, accommodations for everyone. In all its appointments the Bull's Head Hotel is the grandest and finest in the state of Nevada. Tickets, including supper — \$2.50. A cordial invitation is extended to all. Come one, come all and enjoy yourself at the opening of this magnificent hostelry. J. B. Fitch, Manager."

The Elko Free Press for later reported the grand opening had been a gala affair, the Free Press reporter's experience beginning in Elko when he caught a caboose attached to an eastbound freight train that "swayed from side to side" as a jolly crowd continued on its way to the opening of the Bull's Head hotel. At every station the number was added to, and when the caboose pulled up at Wells it was full to overflowing.

According to the Free Press "The clock in the handsome bar-room showed 8 o'clock when the Free Press representative was cordially

greeted by the genial host, Ben Fitch” in the bar room and next saw the dining room, “one of the largest and most convenient dining halls in the state.” Keeping their priorities straight the Elko reporters were soon “returning to the bar-room for another sampling of Ben’s fine whiskey [which] convinces us that they are of the best.” The Free Press noted the ground floor ceiling was 12 feet high, the ceilings of the upstairs hotel rooms 10 feet high, with upstairs doors that lead “to the veranda which adorns the front of the building,” and “The main building is 51 x 70 and built of wood... Altogether the Bull’s Head hotel is a fine building.”

The Free Press was pleased to report “After viewing the hotel we adjourned to the dining hall where a grand ball was in progress, in honor of the opening of the new house. Dancing was kept up until daylight, when all retired.”

Legend has it Giovanna lived upstairs at the Bulls Head, playing piano downstairs, moved to the long-gone S.P. Lodging House sometime during 1893-1897, then returned to the Bulls Head.

The Nevada Hotel

The Nevada Hotel stands as an exquisite jewel of Nineteenth Century railroad architecture, virtually unchanged. Old-timers who claimed to have personally known Giovanna told their children and grandchildren they heard her serenade patrons in the ground floor restaurant with her violin. Wells residents still living recall when the Nevada Hotel converted the ground floor into a “picture show-house” that was the first permanent movie theater in the region. Interestingly, it replaced the S.P. Restaurant-Lodging House on Lot 6, Block E, aka the Wells Hotel.

The Quilici Mercantile Building (aka The Eagle Club, Johnny’s Bar)

Operating as the Quilici Mercantile Building this brick structure played a vital role in displaying three skulls which widely circulated newspaper accounts said were found after a spectre appeared in a dream. Outsiders dismissed the incident as one more whacky story in a time of flagpole sitters, flappers, marathon dances, but the skulls were real. In the 1940’s John Di Grazia remodeled the place for use as a bar giving it its distinctive tile, stainless steel, and glass brick art-deco facade. Di Grazia hung out a sign dubbing his bar the Eagle Club, but everyone called it Johnny’s. Years later a bowling alley operated next door where patrons often saw their bowling balls mysteriously veer to one side or another of a lane as if pushed by an unseen hand.

The El Rancho Casino

Pioneer saloon and casino operator Leo Quilici owned the Bulls Head when he decided his Nineteenth Century bar-hotel was showing its age and built the El Rancho. The El Rancho is historically significant as a commercial structure marking the transition of Wells from a frontier outpost to a modern community with permanence. Unlike the Nevada Hotel and Bulls Head which were erected in the kerosene-lit era before electricity came to town, the El

Rancho incorporated structural steel into its masonry construction and was designed to be illuminated by electricity.

The original hardwood bar and mirrored back bar are rare examples of period bar furnishings that still remain in the casino for which they were made. Today, an oil painted portrait of Leo Quilici adorns the wall by the El Rancho’s bar. Atop the El Rancho went a huge neon sign featuring a wrangler on an animated bucking horse, an early example of Nevada’s neon advertising heritage and one of the few signs of its era that still adorns its original structure.

The grand opening was a regional event that heralded future prosperity and the El Rancho became a crowded, lively place. On the weekend railroaders who lived along the line would come into town to stock up on groceries, many congregating afterwards at the El Rancho to drink and party. So too did ranchers, cowboys, miners, come into Wells to stock up on provisions then stand shoulder to shoulder at the El Rancho to take a drink to cut the dust.

Permission for one-time use of The Legend of Giovanna ©2002 granted by Gene and Peg Kaplan of Wells, Nevada. All other rights reserved by the Kaplans.

