

The Truth About Bunnyman Bridge

VGHRS member Iszy Iszard appeared on the Travel Channel's *The Most Cursed Places* that featured Bunnyman Bridge as number 3. At the time the clip was filmed back in January of 2001 the VGHRS had not researched the area other than the legends that abounded about the location. Since that broadcast we have found new information that clears up the Bunnyman case. Please read below.

**The Bunny Man Unmasked:
The Real Life Origins of an Urban Legend
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Introduction

There is a story that a man dressed as a bunny haunts the residential neighborhoods around our nation's capital. Silly as this may sound at first, the Bunny Man has been a fixture of local legend for at least 30 years. By 1973 the so-called "Bunny Man" had been reported in Maryland, and the District of Columbia. His infrequent and widespread appearances tended to occur in secluded locations and usually tell of a figure clad in a white bunny suit armed with an ax threatening children or vandalizing property. By the 1980s the Bunny Man had become an even more sinister figure with several gruesome murders to his credit. Although he has been reported as far south as Culpepper, Virginia, his main haunt has been the area surrounding a railroad overpass near Fairfax Station, Virginia frequented by party goers, the now infamous "Bunny Man Bridge."

The Legend



For more than 25 years stories of the Bunny Man have been kept alive primarily amongst our teenage population. Over the years the story has evolved into a ghost story suitable for parties, camp outs, and any occasion that such tales are exchanged. It was at one such gathering in 1976 that the author first heard it told. The Bunny Man was said to be responsible for the deaths of two disobedient children in the Clifton area. Others were rumored to have disappeared, and there was talk of animals found horribly mutilated. I never saw the Bunny Man myself, but then I never strayed into the woods at night, especially not near the Bridge...

Most childhood ghost stories are forgotten as one gets older. However, the Bunny Man followed me. After graduating from college, I accepted a position with the Fairfax County Public Library, eventually becoming an Information Specialist in the Virginia Room. One day around 1992 a very well-spoken young lady came into the Virginia Room with a question. She wanted to know how she could find information on a murder that was supposed to have taken place near her home. As I interviewed the patron to ascertain what hard facts she had to go on, some vague memory nagged at me. Two children

were allegedly murdered by a local hermit for trespassing, and their bodies left hanging from a covered bridge. She had no names and only a vague idea of a time frame. The whole story seemed a little fantastic, but the thing that really bothered her was the guy was supposed to be an escaped inmate dressed in a bunny suit. At this point, even though the story had evolved a bit, I recognized the tale from my own youth. We were unable to confirm any of the elements of the story as she or I had first heard it, and I put it down in my mind as a story fabricated to scare children.

I likely would have forgotten about the Bunny Man again if the questions didn't begin coming on a regular basis. The Bunny Man has actually begun appearing in print in recent years, having been mentioned in several high school newspapers,¹ and more recently, on the Internet. The various Internet versions have carried the story to new heights. The most widely circulated written version entitled *The Clifton Bunny Man* and signed by Timothy C. Forbes, Virginia, was posted on a Web site called *Castle of Spirits* around 1999.² This version of the tale is actually quite notable because of the number of specific facts given. Forbes claims that in 1904 inmates from an insane asylum escaped while being transferred to Lorton Prison. One of these escapees, Douglas J. Grifon, murdered fellow escapee Marcus Wallster and eventually became the Bunny Man. Not only is the location identified, but also the names of several victims and the dates of their murders. The story ends with a challenge for the reader to check with the Clifton Town Library for verification of the facts.

Little effort was required to show that all of the specifics given in the Forbes version are false. First, there has never been an asylum for the insane in Fairfax County. Second, Lorton Prison didn't come into existence until 1910, and even then it was an arm of the District of Columbia Corrections system, not Virginia's. Third, neither Grifon nor Wallster appear in the court records of Fairfax County. Lastly, there is not and never has been a Clifton Town Library.

The story also received wide recognition after being featured on national television. The program called *Scariest Places on Earth*, broadcast on the Fox Family Channel, included a segment entitled "Terror on Bunnyman's Bridge" in the 2001 broadcast season.³

Even though these fictional tales of spectacular crimes are easy to dismiss as fiction, the question of the story's origin is not. Was the Bunny Man real? At first I was content to dismiss the Bunny Man as completely fictitious, however I have learned that many legends do have some basis in factual events. At the urging of a fellow employee I finally began a more serious search for the Bunny Man. I began with a few basic assumptions. First, although the tale is told in jurisdictions all around the Washington, D. C. area, the bulk of them take place in Fairfax County. Second, any event that gains as much notoriety as this one must have been originally reported to the public. Third, the original event was probably criminal in nature.

Was the Bunny Man a murderer?

The aspect of the story which gets the most attention are the alleged murders. Researching historical crimes can be very difficult unless you have some basic facts to begin with. Since police records are not available for casual review and court records are indexed by the names of those involved, not by location or type of crime, I had to begin by checking the local newspapers. The tool that has proved the most valuable was the Fairfax County Public Library Historical Newspaper Index.⁴ Virginia Room volunteers Malcolm Richardson and Barbara Welch worked for 10 years to compile a complete index to local Fairfax County newspapers. The careful work of these two, combined with the searching capabilities of a computer database, allowed us to extract every murder and killing reported by the local press from 1872 through 1973. Even though Fairfax County was a rural farming community until well into the 20th century there were over 550 individual mentions of killings in the study period.

Eliminating "run of the mill" domestic murders and concentrating on multiple murders and those involving children (both of which were mercifully rare) served to pare down a list of more than 500 possible events to the following three:

1) Frances and June Holober: February 1949

It would be hard to imagine a more disturbing event for a growing community like Fairfax than the gruesome murders of 37-year-old Frances Holober and her eight-month-old daughter, June. On Thursday February 24, 1949 Mrs. Holober and her daughter drove to Fairfax County in the company of her estranged husband Charles. All were residents of the District of Columbia. Charles Holober later told police that they had come to see the new lodge at a nudist colony to which Mr. Holober belonged.

Upon leaving the lodge the car became mired in some mud. The couple quarreled and Mrs. Holober took the child and walked away from her husband and never returned. Charles Holober spent the night in the car and got a ride back to Washington the next day. He returned with his brother-in-law and a friend to retrieve the car. Still finding no evidence of his family, the police were finally notified.⁵ An intensive search of the area was organized involving Fairfax County Police, Washington Detectives, and Boy Scouts.

About 5:00 p.m., just as the searchers were about to give up for the night, one of the detectives noted that the ground on which they were standing was very soft. Both mother and daughter were found in a shallow grave next to the lodge and less than 200 yards from where Charles Holober's car had been stuck. Frances Holober had been beaten and then shot once in the head and once in the heart. The baby girl had been buried alive.⁶

The local community was shocked and horrified by the cold brutal character of the crime, especially when the investigation identified Charles Holober as the prime suspect. Holober later confessed to investigators that he had planned the murder for three weeks and had not intended to report the disappearance of his wife, but changed his plan when the car got caught in the mud.⁷ The case came to trial on January 16, 1950. After hearing four days of testimony the jury returned a verdict of guilty, and Holober was sentenced to die in the electric chair.⁸ Holober's attorney, T. Brooke Howard, filed an appeal alleging that the jury failed to give proper consideration to the plea of insanity, and that the Court made errors in its instruction to the jury.⁹

The Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals eventually overturned the conviction and ordered a new trial. Charles Francis Holober was re-committed to the Western State Mental Hospital at Marion, Virginia, where he was judged to be insane.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that this was the first time since the Ridgeway Murder Trial of 1927 in which a Fairfax County jury invoked the death penalty.¹¹

2) Minnie, Loretta and Catherine Ridgeway: March 1927

The available newspapers record many murders, but few shocked Fairfax like the ferocious and senseless attack on Mrs. Minnie Ridgeway and her two young daughters. Mrs. Ridgeway lived with her husband and three children on Telegraph Road in Alexandria. Sometime on the morning of March 4, 1927, a man later identified as Louis Boersig called at the home on the pretext of seeing Mr. Ridgeway. Upon finding that he was not at home, Boersig attacked and beat Minnie Ridgeway into unconsciousness and then likewise bludgeoned her daughters Loretta, 7, and Catherine, 5. He then stole money from the home and fled.

The crime was discovered by a neighbor who heard moans coming from inside the house. All three victims were taken to Alexandria Hospital, where Loretta later died. Catherine Ridgeway lived another

eight days before succumbing to her injuries. Minnie recovered and was able to identify the assailant, who was known to the Ridgeways. Boersig was arrested at his home and transferred to the jail in Winchester for his safety.¹²

Louis Boersig was executed for the murders of Loretta and Catherine Ridgeway on July 7, 1927, just three months after his horrific crime.¹³

3) Eva Roy: August 1918

Peter Roy was a Danish immigrant who had come to Fairfax from Minnesota in 1912. In November of that year he purchased two parcels of land near the current intersection of Old Keene Mill Road and Sydenstricker Road, totaling 180 acres.¹⁴ Roy, a widower, became a prosperous farmer and an active member of the Lee Chapel Methodist Church. With him resided his eldest daughter Caroline, her husband William K. Jerman, and his younger daughter Eva.

On the morning of Aug. 4, 1918, Eva Roy, age 14, left her home near Burke, at around 9:00 a.m. to tend her father's small herd of cows. When Eva failed to return home that evening her father began a search. Neighbors were soon enlisted to help, but it was some 24 hours later that her body was found tied to a tree in the woods near the old Hanse House, her apron strings tight about her throat. The county coroner, Dr. W. I. Robey, concluded that the girl had been "Brutally assaulted" before being strangled to death.¹⁵ A Coroner's Jury was appointed, and quickly concluded: "We, the jury, find that Eva Roy came to her death at the hands of some unknown person, and the indications point to Lu Hall, as the probable perpetrator of the crime."¹⁶ Hall, a 33-year-old woodcutter, lived about 1/2 mile from the scene of the crime and was seen in the woods near the time of the girl's disappearance.

The case was not to be easily solved, however, as other suspects were soon identified and eventually eliminated.

The first, William Wooster, age 16, was soon arrested for assaulting a "colored girl." He had recently been released from an insane asylum, but was found that he was nowhere near the scene of Eva's murder.¹⁷

The next suspect to emerge was a soldier who deserted from Camp A. A. Humphries (now Fort Belvoir). The soldier, a sergeant whom the papers fail to name, was located some days later near Charlottesville, Virginia. He had scratches on his face and hands, was wearing freshly laundered clothes, and claimed to have no memory of the events between his leaving Camp Humphries and his capture. Sheriff Allison traveled to Charlottesville to interview the man, but after some weeks of investigation determined that he was not connected with the crime.¹⁸

The lagging investigation seemed to finally receive a break with the apprehension of Ben Ruben, an escaped inmate from Lorton Prison. Ruben, who had been serving a three-year sentence for housebreaking,¹⁹ was arrested by Washington, D. C. police on September 19 for assaulting a little girl. While on the way to the police station he confessed to Eva's murder. Ruben claimed "he met Eva Roy, looking after her father's cows. He asked her for food and in a conversation with her he told her he was an ex-convict. She declared she would 'turn him up' as he declared, and he became excited and choked her."²⁰ The Washington authorities were unconvinced by Ruben's story and wanted to try him for assault and theft before turning him over to the Virginia courts. An investigator sent by the Commonwealth of Virginia to interview Ruben concluded that he was not responsible for the crime, but extradition papers were filed anyway.²¹ On September 26 Ruben was escorted to the scene of the crime by Sheriff Allison, Commonwealth Attorney C. Vernon Ford, Assistant Commonwealth Attorney Wilson M. Farr, Dr. Swetnam, and acting counsel for the defense F. D. Richardson.²² After being unable to locate the scene of the attack or the tree where the body was left, Ruben denied killing Eva.

He claimed the presence of the girl's father spurred him to recant his confession. Ruben's motive for confessing was revealed some weeks later when on October 6 he escaped from the jail in Fairfax. He was arrested two days later while attempting to buy a pistol and admitted that he concocted his story in order to be transferred to Fairfax, where he thought escape would be easier.²³ He was eventually convicted of burglary and escape from jail and was sentenced to four more years in prison.²⁴

Lou Hall was finally tried for the murder in Fairfax County Court. The prosecution was handled by State's Attorney C. Vernon Ford, assisted by Wilson M. Farr. The defense was provided by Walter T. Oliver. His first trial resulted in a hung jury with nine votes for guilty, three for innocent.²⁵ His second trial resulted in a clear verdict of "Not Guilty."²⁶

Peter Roy died on January 22, 1938, and was interred in Lee Chapel Cemetery next to his youngest daughter.²⁷ Her murderer was never found.

After scrutinizing the three preceding events I concluded that none are likely candidates for the Bunny Man. Charles Holober was caught and incarcerated. Louis Boersig was caught and summarily executed, and the murder of Eva Roy, even though it has many of the elements that a legend could build upon, is simply too old. This last assertion is based upon one other important factor that has emerged through my research. The Bunny Man, like any good legend, has evolved over time. The recent rash of persons researching the origins of this story have been largely attracted by the spectacular nature of the alleged crime. The previously cited Forbes version of the story features 32 victims and has a pronounced supernatural element. This contrasts sharply with versions of the tale I collected from the 1980s which generally involved only one to three victims, usually children. More importantly, the earliest versions (dating to the 1970s) did not mention any deaths at all. These earliest versions recount acts of vandalism (usually against secluded residential construction sites) or couples parked at secluded "Lovers Lane", type locations being accosted/threatened by a strange individual dressed in a white Bunny costume. More research was clearly needed.

Fact vs. Folklore

After nearly eight years of research I finally got a solid lead. The November 11, 2000 Washington Post²⁸ ran an article highlighting an interesting collection called the Maryland Folklore Archive. From the 1950s through c. 1990, students at three Maryland universities collected, researched, and transcribed numerous local legends. This material has finally come to rest in the holdings of the University of Maryland. In 1973, University of Maryland student Patricia Johnson submitted a paper titled "The Bunny Man."²⁹ This paper was compiled as part of the course work for a class entitled Introduction to Folklore (English 460). She interviewed 33 students from Prince Georges County, Maryland ages 15 to 18.

Ms. Johnson relates that the tale met all of the qualifications of an Urban Belief Tale.³⁰ Specifically, it (1) takes place in an urban setting, (2) existed prior to her project, and (3) had appeared in print as truth. She goes on to state "included in this collection is an article from the Washington Post which verifies the story as truth."³¹ This was an important claim as I had found no primary sources to date. I was extremely frustrated to find that the page containing the referenced article was missing from the original paper. With any hope of a quick resolution gone, I turned to examining the paper itself. Johnson's informants told 54 variations of the story. A rough tally revealed the following:

- a. Fourteen different geographic locations are mentioned
- b. Eighteen involve the Bunny Man chasing or frightening people, usually children, with a hatchet or ax
- c. Fourteen tell of attacks on cars

- d. Nine claim he attacked a couple parked in a car
- e. Five accuse him of vandalism on homes or buildings
- f. Only three mentioned a murder

Based on the widespread geographic locations and the significant variation represented in the tales Johnson concluded that the Bunny Man was an Urban Belief Tale . In short, the Bunny Man did not exist.

The Breakthrough

After re-reading Johnson's paper several times I finally noted that she heard the tale for the first time around Halloween 1970. Having no better leads I began a systematic search of the Washington Post for October of that year in hopes of finding the previously cited news article. I was elated (and not a little surprised) to find the following:

Man in Bunny Suit Sought in Fairfax

Fairfax County police said yesterday they are looking for a man who likes to wear "white bunny rabbit costume" and throw hatchets through car windows. Honest.

Air Force Academy Cadet Robert Bennett told police that shortly after midnight last Sunday he and his fiancée were sitting in a car in the 5400 block of Guinea Road when a man "dressed in a white suit with long bunny ears" ran from the nearby bushes and shouted: "You're on private property and I have your tag number."

The "Rabbit" threw a wooden-handled hatchet through the right front car window, the first-year cadet told police. As soon as he threw the hatchet, the "rabbit" skipped off into the night, police said. Bennett and his fiancée were not injured.

Police say they have the hatchet, but no other clues in the case. They say Bennett was visiting an uncle, who lives across the street from the spot where the car was parked. The cadet was in the area to attend last weekend's Air Force-Navy football game.

When I began this project the aspect that puzzled me most was the bunny suit. I expected to find that the legend was spawned by an event that was strange or in some way notable, but I never suspected the Bunny Man really was a "Bunny Man." I was even further surprised to find a second appearance recorded two weeks later:

The "Rabbit" Reappears

A man wearing a furry rabbit suit with two long ears appeared ♦ again ♦ on Guinea Road in Fairfax County Thursday night, police reported, this time wielding an ax and chopping away at a roof support on a new house.

Less than two weeks ago a man wearing what was described as a rabbit suit accused two persons in a parked car of trespassing and heaved a hatchet through a closed window of the car at 5400 Guinea Rd. They were not hurt.

Thursday night's rabbit, wearing a suit described as gray, black and white, was spotted a block away at 5307 Guinea Rd.

Paul Phillips, a private security guard for a construction company, said he saw the "rabbit" standing on the front porch of a new, but unoccupied house.

"I started talking to him," Phillips said, "and that's when he started chopping." "All you people trespass around here," Phillips said the "Rabbit" told him as he whacked eight gashes in the pole. "If you don't get out of here, I'm going to bust you on the head."

Phillips said he walked back to his car to get to get his handgun, but the "Rabbit", carrying the long-handled ax, ran off into the woods.

The security guard said the man was about 5-feet-8, 160 pounds and appeared to be in his early 20s.

Two documented appearances by a bunny-suited figure in the same Fairfax County community. Was this the Bunny Man or just copy-cats acting out stories they had heard from somewhere else? I again turned to Johnson's paper for clues. As mentioned earlier 14 of her tales mention a couple in a parked car being attacked, but nine of these specifically mention a hatchet being thrown into the car. Of the five mentioning vandalism, two describe "columns" being chopped. The story told by 17-year-old G. Taylor was particularly revealing. She related:

"I think it was last year or maybe before that. I came home from school. I was listening to the news. I had just gotten in and I heard there was a man and a woman sitting in a car. It could have been teenagers, but they were just parked and all. And all of a sudden, they looked up and there was this bunny. You know, this giant bunny just ran out of the woods, you know, from behind the trees and all. And he ran in front of the car. And he had a hatchet, and he threw it through the car and just turned around and went back away. They were just shocked. They just sat there and watched. Then an old man came out of the house and warned them to get off of his property. You know, they tried to explain and everything but he just wouldn't listen. And then, they took it to the police afterwards. And the police, you know, went back and all and asked him if he had seen anything. And nobody had seen it. Until a couple of days later, then a lot of people were saying that they had seen the bunny man. And then, after that, the police tried to investigate, but they couldn't get anything. And then they found these places that sell costumes and all. And they found that it hadn't been but three people that had .. Uhm .. Bought costumes. Then they, you know, long put theirs away and brought them back and all. And it wasn't them. And nobody every found out about the bunny man. It just went on for a couple of weeks and then it died out."³⁵

Miss Taylor's recollections are important for a number of reasons. First, she identifies the television news as her source of information. Second, she accurately relates the hatchet thrown into the occupied car, the teenage couple, the accusation of trespassing, and police involvement. Third, she states that it went on for "a couple of weeks" then stopped. Lastly, she identifies the time frame to within six months. The October 22 news story is clearly the origin of the tale she told. Moreover, although the story had mutated noticeably in 22 years, many of Johnson's 53 other versions also contain recognizable elements of the October 1970 incidents. Newspapers accounts and oral reports can be revealing, but neither can be trusted to be completely accurate. It was time to look for more trustworthy records.

Official Reports

The Fairfax County Police Department has no official record of the October 18 assault on Robert Bennett and his fiancée, but they do have an Investigation Report relating to the October 29 vandalism incident. Although FCPD is not required to release any information relating to misdemeanor offenses, they kindly supplied a redacted³⁶ copy of the report for this project.

The investigation report confirms the basics of the event as told in the October 31 Washington Post article. At 10:30 p.m. on October 29, 1970 six officers responded to 5307 Guinea Road for "a subject dressed as a Rabbit with an Ax."³⁷ The officers found no rabbit and the case was turned over to

Investigator W. L. Johnson of the Criminal Investigation Bureau.

Johnson began with a visit to the construction offices of the Kings Park West Subdivision on October 31. He found no rabbit, but did receive a call shortly after his visit from someone who worked at Kings Park West.³⁸ The caller claimed to have just received a telephone call from someone identifying himself as "the Axe Man." The Axe Man allegedly said "Mr. _____, you have been messing up my property, by dumping tree stumps, limbs and brush, and other things on the property." The Axe Man further stated that "you can make everything right, by meeting me tonight and talking about the situation." The representative from Kings Park West stated that the caller sounded to be a white male in his late teens or early 20s. The police set up a stake out, but the "Axe Man" never materialized.

On November 4, Investigator Johnson received a call from a resident of the area who informed him that her son claimed to know the identity of the "Bunny Man." She stated that some of the neighborhood children "who have seen or been with the Bunny Man" described him as an older teenager. Johnson interviewed the son (age 8) and eventually learned that he had not actually met the Bunny Man but "had only heard of the Bunny Man at school, from the rest of the children talking about him."³⁹ Interviews with other neighborhood children had similar results.

On March 14, 1971 Johnson wrote the following summary:

"After a very extensive investigation into this and all other cases of this same nature,⁴⁰ it is still unsubstantiated as to whether or not there really is a white rabbit.

The only people who have seen this so-called white rabbit have been children of rather young ages, and the complainant in this case.

Upon interviewing every one in this case that may have had any knowledge of any incidents concerning a white rabbit, that has been no significant information uncovered that would lead to the identity of the person or persons that were posing as a white rabbit.

This case will be marked as inactive."⁴¹

His Identity?

Who was the Bunny Man, and what was he trying to accomplish? Sadly, we will likely never know his identity. Likewise his true motivations are known only to himself, but there are a few clues contained in the foregoing sources. On October 18 the Bunny Man accused Robert Bennett of trespassing.⁴² On October 29 the Bunny Man told security guard Paul Phillips that "You all trespass around here."⁴³, and on November 4, the self-styled "Axe Man" accused the unnamed representative of Kings Park West Subdivision of dumping debris on his property.⁴⁴ If we assume that all three incidents involved the same individual, then it appears that this young man was disturbed by the development of the area. Said development was extensive in 1970, too. Until the second World War Fairfax County was a rural farming community. The build-up of Federal employment in the region fueled intensive residential development in the closer suburbs of Arlington and Fairfax Counties. The 1950s saw tract housing being built in Springfield, McLean, Annandale, and Fairfax. The somewhat modest developments of the early 1960s eventually gave rise to near town-size projects like Reston and Burke Centre.

Kings Park West is a subdivision of over 1500 homes, and was one of several such developments either built or under consideration for the Burke area at the time of the incidents. James W. Robinson Secondary⁴⁵ School opened the next year with nearly 3,900 students. While Fairfax County began to look seriously at land use planning issues in the 1950s, the first countywide Comprehensive Land Use

Plan was not adopted until 1975. Many people living in Fairfax County in the 1960s and '70s were disturbed to see pastures and woods giving way to roads, subdivisions, and shopping centers. Being forced to watch helplessly while the face of your community changes around you can elicit strange behavior in some people.

And what was the significance of the bunny costume? I am not prepared to even hazard a guess.

Conclusion

Who the Bunny Man was and what motivated him to act in such a bizarre manner is still a mystery, however, the available evidence points to the October 1970 events as the genesis of the Bunny Man legend. Many of the tales collected by Patricia Johnson in 1973 clearly derive from the events as reported in the newspaper and the television news of that period. The official police report makes no mention of any pre-existing stories that this individual could have been copying. Furthermore, William L. Johnson specifically stated to the author that he found no indications of any earlier stories or criminal incidents involving an individual dressed as a rabbit.⁴⁶

It is also plainly evident that the story began to take on the features of an urban legend quite soon after the events were reported. Investigator Johnson was following leads generated by school-yard rumors less than two weeks after the first appearance of the Bunny Man, and by the time Patricia Johnson began her work two-and-a-half years later, the story had mutated in location, frequency, and severity.

And there you have one interpretation of the story.