



# The Case of the Petrified Girl

**R**aised in the hills of eastern Kentucky, I grew up with the legend of the “petrified girl.” Set in the little farming village of Ezel, near my hometown in Morgan County, the story evokes religious accounts of “incorruptible” corpses as well as ghoulish tales of the “undead.”

Late in the last century—one account says “in 1880,” another “the 1880s,” still another “around 1900”—workmen were moving graves from the old Ezel burying ground to a new cemetery site. In some accounts the reason for the relocation is not recalled, but most state it was due to a typhoid epidemic that stemmed from the graveyard’s pollution of local wells. In the course of the disinterments, the men uncovered the grave of a young girl. Some vague accounts have neither name nor age for her, while others reach near agreement that she was “a 17-year-old daughter of a Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler” or more specifically “Minnie Wheeler, a seventeen-year-old girl.”

When her casket was reached it was reportedly too heavy to be lifted. But more men and ropes were obtained, and a hole was drilled in the coffin to let water out. Finally the still-heavy casket was lifted out of the grave and opened, whereupon the girl was discovered to have been petrified; even her clothing, says one narrative, had turned to stone (Nickell 1994).

Supposedly—some say because of

fears the grave would be robbed and the body exhibited in a side show—the girl’s body was reburied in an unmarked grave, the location of which was thereafter kept a secret. However, one versified account claims that the fears were actually realized: “To this day, her body had never been found, / Because her brother George sold her stone body for many crowns / to a museum for display; she brought in crowds. / People viewed her with awe in disbelief with frowns” (Plumlee 1993).

## Documentation

Involving aspects of folklore analysis, historical and paranormal research, forensic pathology, and other disciplines, my investigation began with the collection of various narratives and personal interviews, then progressed to a search through the death notices in the *Hazel Green Herald*. There was no “Minnie Wheeler” listed, but there was this entry in the Wednesday, October 7, 1885, issue: “Miss Nannie Wheeler, daughter of J.W. Wheeler, of Grassy, died of flux [unnatural discharge] on last Thursday, and was buried at Ezel on Friday. Miss Wheeler was about 17 years of age.” (“Last Thursday” would have meant that she died on October 1, 1885.) Federal census records revealed that “Nannie” was actually Nancy A. and that among her five siblings was a younger brother, George W. The match-

ing surnames and the similarity of given names (“Nannie” easily being garbled into “Minnie”), together with other parallel details including the same age and a brother George, persuaded me I had found my quarry. The burial at Ezel was an especially corroborative fact, and so (I would soon learn) was the time period in question.

Further searching through back issues of the *Herald* turned up the following report, dated February 17, 1888: “The people of Ezel, feeling that the location of the grave yard [sic] has had much to do with the epidemic of sickness, on Wednesday commenced to remove those who are there buried to a more suitable place. We understand fifty graves will be required to accommodate the coffins removed.” The following issue reported: “Ezel, Feb. 20 . . . A beautiful site has been procured for the public grave yard at this place, and the work of transferring the dead from the old to new grave yard has begun, and will continue until all are moved.”

I expected next to see a report on the discovery of Nannie’s “petrified” body, but, in one of the most disappointing moments in my career as an investigator, I learned there was a gap in the record—

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A relocated cemetery in Ezel, Kentucky, supposedly holds among its secrets a "petrified girl," believed buried among these graves. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

missing issues of the newspaper during the relevant period. I was therefore forced to rely on hand-me-down narratives. Although, as I have already indicated, these are quite variable as to details, the *effect* of the discovery comes through quite clearly. But was Nannie's body really *petrified*?

## Petrification?

On the one hand, the water that was reportedly drained from the coffin could be an indication that conditions were right for petrification. That occurs when ground water containing dissolved mineral salts infiltrates buried organic material, replacing the decaying matter with the minerals while preserving the shape and even the cellular structure of the original material ("Petrification" 1986).

On the other hand, true petrification in the case of a coffin burial would be exceedingly unlikely. Several "petrified" people have been outright hoaxes, including the *Forest City Man*, shown at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893; the *Pine River Man* (made of water-lime, sand, and gravel) "discovered" in 1876; the *Colorado Man* (faked for P. T. Barnum at a cost of \$2,000); and others, including the notorious *Cardiff Giant* (unearthed at Cardiff, New York in 1869) (MacDougall 1958, 23–24; Stein 1993, 13–14, 145).

Often, bodies are said to be petrified when observers are simply astonished to find them in a surprising state of preservation. For example, there is a persistent legend that the corpse of Abraham Lincoln was "petrified" and indeed had "turned to stone" when it was observed in a well-preserved state while his body was on tour after his assassination in 1865, as well as upon reburials in 1886 and 1901. On the latter occasion, his corpse was described as resembling "a statue of himself lying there." In fact, the body had been expertly embalmed and had been kept in an airtight coffin (Lewis 1929).

I researched another Morgan County case that occurred in 1921 when the body of a woman who had died elsewhere was brought home by train. When people touched her well-preserved body, it felt "hard," and several thought it was "petrified," although the railway company physician explained the body was simply embalmed—something the rural folk were relatively unfamiliar with (Nickell 1994).

In the case of young Nancy Wheeler, the excessive weight of her coffin could well have been due to its having been waterlogged (as in fact described), and/or due to the story's exaggeration over time. But what about the unusual preservation itself? It is extremely unlikely that her body was embalmed, yet after nearly thirty months it had

remained free, or apparently free, of decomposition.

Although comparatively rare, there are numerous reports of "incorruptible" corpses. In more than one instance investigation has shown that the body had, in fact, been embalmed. In many other cases the body is actually mummified—i.e., desiccated—a condition that can occur naturally under certain conditions (such as being kept in sandy soil or in a dry tomb or catacombs). (It can also be induced by embalming.) Several supposedly "incorruptible" bodies of Catholic saints are revealingly described as "having brown, dry skin with the texture of leather," or being "darkened and wrinkled with age," even "completely mummified" (Cruz 1977). Some of the corpses on display in glass coffins have had to be extensively repaired—for example being treated with resin and braced with wire, and even, like St. Bernadette of Lourdes, having the exposed face covered with a wax mask (Cruz 1977; Nickell 1993, 85–93).

But what about cases in which the corpse had not been kept in dry conditions but rather was found intact despite perpetually wet conditions? As forensic pathologists and anthropologists know, a body that has been submerged in water or in wet soil for a long time may form a soaplike substance called *adipocere*, which may develop in the outer layer of fat after three months or more (Spitz 1993, 38). It is estimated to become "complete in adult bodies" after "a year to a year and a half" (Gonzales et al. 1954, 68). Adipocere was once thought to be caused by the body's fat turning literally into soap; actually it is due to the decomposition of the fat into insoluble salts of fatty acids, producing a yellowish-white substance popularly known as "grave wax." It usually forms in the face and buttocks, but may affect any part of the body. Depending on the subsequent conditions, the body may eventually take on the leathery effect of mummification, or may in time decompose completely (Ubelaker and Scammell 1992; Geberth 1993). (Many of the "incorruptible" bodies of saints are only temporarily preserved and are later found to be reduced to skeletons

[Nickell 1993]).

In certain European (e.g., Slavic) and other countries the discovery of a preserved corpse may provoke a bizarre response. Some people believe such preservation means the person is one of the "undead," so they may drive a wooden stake through the corpse's heart and then burn the body to end the imagined ghoulish activities of the "vampire" (Wilson and Wilson 1992).

Most likely, adipocere produced the "petrified" appearance of Nannie Wheeler's corpse which was reportedly unearthed in conditions of excessive saturation from ground water. Certainly her body does appear to have been well preserved—some say as beautiful as she had been in life, with her hands still clutching her hat. However the time between burial and disinterment had been less than two and a half years, and there have been instances of excellent preservation over much longer periods—even without apparent embalming.

An 1896 Massachusetts case may likewise be explained by adipocere for-

mation. Reportedly, a woman's body, being relocated to another cemetery, was found to be "petrified." If it is true that (after several months) "the flowers on her breast *seemed as fresh* as on the day of her burial" (emphasis added), that is more consistent with their having been kept under cool, wet conditions than with a claim of petrification, since flowers that were actually petrified would have looked like stone. Significantly, there was "a spring which boiled up nearby" (Whalen 1981).

As to the story about Nannie's body being placed on display, that is probably untrue, being absent from all but one account. It was apparently based on someone having seen a body in a museum (reportedly in Cincinnati) that was thought to resemble the teenager.

It is an irony that the young lady has come to be better known for her repose in death than for her all-too-brief life, but such is the effect that mystery can have.

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