

Hulda's Story

Excerpt from "Legends and Lore of Sleepy Hollow and the Hudson Valley" by Jonathan Kruk

Witch-Doctor-Heroine

When the strange woman first appeared in Tarrytown's dry goods store, no one even tried to speak with her. Cloaked in a flowing shawl, with deep-set eyes, they shunned the thin woman who looked Bohemian. She wasn't English, Dutch, German, or even Indian. Reverend Ritzema warned from the pulpit of the Old Dutch Church. 'Do not have foreign intercourse.' Strangers spelled trouble to this tight-knit community.

Farmer Requa explained he found her hut near Spook Rock. It was a place generally avoided. Legend had it some Native curse made the stones moan. Searching for a lost cow, the thick scent of drying herbs drew him to Hulda's shack.

Now, a local Weckquaeskeck man, known for speaking several languages, entered the Tarrytown shop. Requa asked if he could speak to this stranger. The Native man asked the woman something. She replied in an unusual Native dialect. He told the Dutch; she had come to live nearby and wished to barter her baskets, furs, and medicines. Her name sounded like something from the old world faerie tales. They called her Mother Hulda.

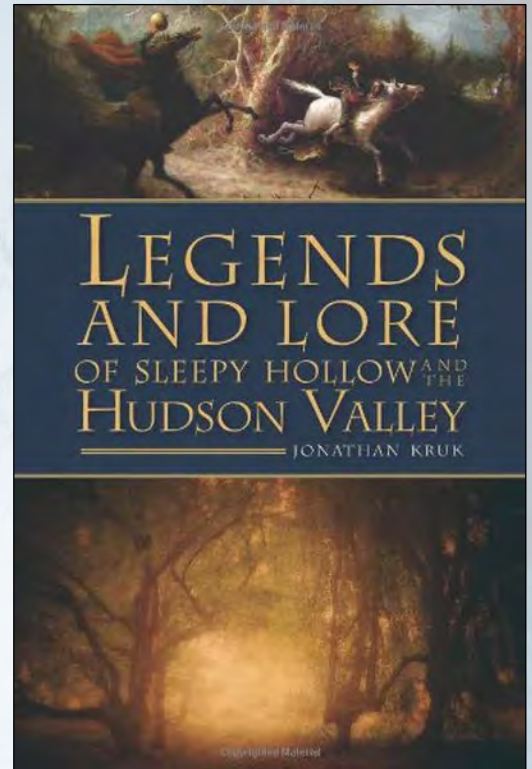
The Weckquaeskeck man thought she had lived with a nearby tribe, perhaps the Siwanoy or Sint Sinct. She may have been a captive or a widow. Most of those peoples had died out or left the area. He explained. 'She's come to live with you Dutch people now.' The Dutch folk declared her a witch. Hulda's baskets were neatly woven and very sturdy. She always seemed to have a rabbit to trade with her neighbors. Farm folk always traded for fur. Nevertheless, the Dutch heeded Reverend Ritzema's decree and remained circumspect. She may be a witch!

When people fell ill, however, with the croup, a wound or stomach pains, they'd discover a bundle of herbs on their stoops. They knew they came from the woman who practiced the art of healing with plants. Privately, they accepted Hulda's offerings, returning her favor with metal goods like needles, betty lamps or cooking pots. Publicly, they scoffed claiming. 'I take no yarbs from that Mother Hulda!'

The American Revolution tore Westchester County in half. The Patriots took the upper part above the Croton River. The Tories held the lower part below White Plains. Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow remained in the "Neutral Grounds;" a no man's land. There, some took sides, marching off to fight. Everyone feared both armies. Raiders, for the British called "Cow-boys", plundered many a farm. "Skinners" their American counterparts, did the same. Farmers hid their cattle on a nearby ragged rise, sometimes milking the cows there, and even churning butter. Thus it earned the name Buttermilk Hill. Hulda often foraged there as well, much to the chagrin of the war's thieves.

The war made folk in the area all the more appreciative of Hulda's bundles. Raid victims received along with homemade medicine bundles dried rabbit meat, edible roots and even an occasional maple syrup sweet, all compliments of Mother Hulda. Now, no one pretended to reject Hulda's gifts. Her medicinal plants proved a special godsend with the pox of war upon them. Still, few people directly acknowledged Hulda even in those trying times. They feared Reverend Ritzema's warnings. The herb woman then faced the horrors of war with no one to comfort her.

The fight came to Tarrytown on October the 4th 1776. Redcoats landed ashore from an expeditionary fleet in the Tappan Zee. They sought rebel supply houses, forage, and maybe some "cow-boy cattle." Daniel Martling roused the local Minutemen to ready some small cannons. Irving, in *The Legend*, describes him as "Doffue Martling" boasting about how he fired off at the British warships until his gun burst. Tarrytown gave in to the British force without firing a shot. The local militia not only declined Hulda's services as a sharpshooter but also made a hasty retreat at the sight of the Redcoats.



The War for Independence put Tarrytown, in the dangerous no man's land known as the Neutral Ground. This meant raids and skirmishes plagued the region. The historic record shows another British raid the following year. Official accounts from both sides show no deaths, but one did occur.

Returning from a medicine delivery near Battle Hill in White Plains, Hulda happened the raid. British troops again landed from The Phoenix and The Rose their warships in the Tappan Zee. Tarrytown militiamen nervously mustered and were forming a line to make a stand. Terrified by the well-armed Regulars, the local rebels dared not fire. Hulda dashed to her hut, gathered her musket and powder horn, and took a position on the front line.

The Old Dutch Church sexton, there among the militia ranks reported it was Hulda who broke the standoff. When the British spied the Dutch sharpshooter, they sent dragoons out to stop her. Hulda lived up to her ancient name as a wood goddess. She not only eluded the pursuing Redcoats, but the bewitching patriot also got them lost drawing them away from Tarrytown.

When the shooting stopped and the British returned to their vessels, out came the Dutch Minutemen of Tarrytown, minus their top shot. Striding a short distance East of the Old Dutch Church, they found the lank, lifeless body of Mother Hulda. No silver bullet was required for killing this "witch." A mere ball of lead pierced her humble body. The one they thought of as being dark as pitch, proved to have for them, a brave heart of gold.

No one knew what to do. Hulda acted heroically, but they considered her a pagan witch. They feared touching the body, some it was safer to leave her to the elements. "*She must be buried!*", Requa and others insisted. A few people searched her hut discovered a Bible, and a will calling for gold to be given to war widow families. "*She acted like a good Christian!*", a good-wife declared. 'She drove off those Redcoats for us!' They wrapped her body in her shawl and carried it to the Old Dutch Church Graveyard.

"*She cannot be placed in sacred church ground*", Dominee Ritzema explained. "*She is not Christian!*"

They decided to show their witch respect. Ritzema allowed the body buried away from the marked Christian graves. The Witch of Sleepy Hollow was laid to rest by the north wall of their Old Dutch Church. Ritzema left the grave unmarked. Hulda, however, made her mark on Sleepy Hollow during those trying times. She's the "high German doctor" who left a spell on Sleepy Hollow.

White Captives:

Country people of the 18th century in Europe and America commonly called widows living alone and over the age of fifty, "witch." Hulda, though an exceptional woman, was no exception to this rule. Anyone, especially a single woman, coming into a small community would suffer exclusion. A white woman speaking an Indian language indicated "native captivity." This resulted from the clashes of colonial cultures. The times brought disease, skirmishes, and war. Occasionally, after raiding settlements, the Native people took in the orphaned children of the Europeans and Africans. Some were ransomed. Others, like Tarrytown's Hulda, and the daughter of the Westchester pioneer Anne Hutchinson, integrated into the Native community.

Anne Hutchinson was killed by a Wecquaeskeck war party in 1643 during the Willem Kieft wars. Her daughter Hannah, abducted by the tribe, became part of their community. Several years later, when the girl was in her teens, Peter Stuyvesant managed to ransom her. She soon chooses, however, to return to live among Native peoples marrying an Esopus man. Hulda, a Native-speaking white woman, apparently shared Hannah's fate. Taken, or taken in, she probably had a Native husband who died, leading the Native folk to return her to a European community.

Bacon describes Hulda as a "Bohemian." Curiously, the Philipse family originally descended from the ancient Viscounts Felyps of Bohemia. This choice of ethnic background evokes the old stereotype given to the Romish or Gypsy peoples from Bohemia, a province in the Czech Republic, on the German border. Bohemian gypsies were considered eccentric and untrustworthy by their Slavic and Germanic neighbors. Hulda certainly fell victim to those fears.

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Legends of the Rockefeller State Park Preserve

“Spook Rock” Legends

Excerpt from “Chronicles of Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow” Edgar Mayhew Bacon, 1897

In the days before the railroad was built, the population of Tarrytown was small and the majority of the inhabitants were farmers; good, plain, practical people, not given to romancing and the inveterate foes of novelty. Some elder folk, whose memories take them back to the thirties, remember the story of the Spook Rock as it was transmitted to them from their parents and grandparents, which should satisfy any sceptic of its genuine antiquity.

Not far from the cottage of Hulda, the witch, it stood; but it was an ancient landmark before Sleepy Hollow mothers ever used Hulda's name to frighten their babies into obedience. Tradition says that sachems and medicine men of the Lenni-Lenape built their council-fires about it when the world was young; for the Spook Rock was an Indian shrine.

One night a young Indian returning late from a hunt and passing near the council rock, was surprised to see lights moving in that direction, while at the same time his ears were assailed by the sound of musical voices. Not being ignorant of the sacred character of the place and the miraculous things that had occurred there, his curiosity was at once aroused and he crept cautiously from tree to tree till he came upon a sight of extraordinary interest. A dozen girls, beautiful beyond anything that the young man had ever imagined, were dancing on the surface of the rock. Linking hands, and leaning far outward in the rapid figure, they seemed to tread on the very edge of the stone, if indeed they touched anything more solid than the air at all. To the bewildered and delighted watcher, they were like a ring of forest leaves that have been caught up and whirled around by the wind.

Their voices were as sweet as their bodies were beautiful and graceful, and no one could have mistaken them for anything less than celestial, even if there had not been, in the centre of the circle around which they danced, a great basket, which, as everyone knows, is the approved vehicle when heavenly maids pay a visit earthward.

The scene was lit by unearthly flambeaux that flared among the trees like Will-o'-the-wisps. The singing and the dancing grew wilder and madder and more fascinating every moment, till the solitary spectator forgot himself and gave a cry of admiration. In a moment, half frightened and half laughing, the bevy scrambled into the basket, with little screams and pretty panics, like girls that would fain go a-slumming and retreat at the first sight of a tipsy man. In they crowded, hugger-mugger, higgledy-piggledy, all but one, who lingered a moment and looked back. She was the most beautiful of them all. Then, in a moment, she took her place, or rather was dragged in by the rest and, amid a chorus of laughter, they were all whisked out of sight and the young Indian was left standing alone in the dark woods.

Directly over the rock, as he followed the basket with his eyes, a large star was shining, and he knew, of course, that it must be their home. That night the young man turned and tossed and could get no sleep. When day came, he discovered that his appetite had failed, which is a most unusual thing to happen to an Indian.

He waited impatiently till night had settled down once more, and then, as soon as the village was quiet, he sought the Spook Rock.

It may have been on that very next night, or after weeks or months of waiting,— I do not know,— the basket was let down again, and its occupants, with many a titter and many innocent pranks, disembarked and began to dance as before. While they were in full swing there was a sudden dash among them as a hungry panther might drop into the midst of a covey of quail that are gossiping together at bedtime. Never did birds take to wing more quickly, whirring away from danger, than the maidens; but one of them, the most beautiful of all, was held by the young hunter, who took her home, triumphantly, to his empty lodge. The quail may be tamed, but be careful that on some spring morning it does not hear the piping of its mates. The star girl made a good and loving wife, and when a baby was born to her she forgot any longing she may have had for her old companions. Three years passed, and one night, when the air was peculiarly still, a sound of distant singing came to the hunter's lodge, and his star wife grew restless, and her eyes burned like coals. She murmured in her sleep and sang little snatches of strange songs. The following night she was missing.

The little babe in the lodge cried and refused such food as the hunter had to give it and finally, when it was dead, he hollowed a grave for it by the Pocantico and sat down alone once more. After a while he took his bow and arrows and went hunting, but never returned and the lodge fell to ruin, so that when the snow came it drifted between the bare poles. When three years more had gone, and the smell of the spring was in the air again, the star wife came back. A few hours of absence, she thought, and probably her husband had not even missed her. A few hours of pleasure — how the time had flown. She found the empty lodge sticks with astonishment. Even the grass was growing rank where she had lain by the side of her husband and baby only a few hours before. Something must be wrong. She had mistaken the place and would search for her home.

Up and down the Pocantico woods — you may meet her any spring night, for doubtless she is looking there still for the lost lodge.

Within the present generation the lights have been seen moving at night in the neighborhood of the Spook Rock, and if any adventurous youth will run the risk, he may find the dancers still tripping and singing on spring nights.



**Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation**

Rockefeller State Park Preserve

The Legends of Rockefeller Preserve

Hulda of Bohemia

Hulda was a Bohemian woman, who came without references or kin and Settled in the midst of conservative folks who were familiar with each other's grandparents. To be a stranger was to be open to suspicion; to be alone was not respectable. Acting upon a well-known principle, recognized in most rural communities, the newcomer is held to be guilty till he has proved himself to be innocent.

Hulda gathered herbs, "simples," in the mill woods; she knew where the boneset grew, and vervain, and mandrake, and calamus. Her cabin was full of the sweet odor of plants adrying; specifics for colds and fevers and the unsophisticated pains and aches of simple folk. She wove baskets, too, and was wise, as a woman ought not to be. Rumor, as busy in Sleepy Hollow in 1770 as she is in 1897, said that the witch had commerce with the Indians who came occasionally into this region from far up the State, and exchanged with them secrets of black art and "yarbs."

A tapu, as effectual as ever existed in the South Sea islands, cut this woman off from human intercourse, and when the war came she, alone, had no friend to discuss her hopes or tell her fears to. From first to last the neutral ground got the worst of the Revolution. Friends and foes struggled across it and fought or fled back again. Every crime in the calendar was committed in the names of King and Congress alike, till the harried remnant of the people sat among their denuded fields and depleted barns; and faced starvation and sickness with such stoicism as they could muster. Sometimes an undetected hand left dainties that were hard to procure, on the door-step or the windowsill of some house where want and pain had settled together; but the donor was invisible.

In those days, men patrolled the highways to intercept the cattle-thieves that ran off their stock, and as the population became smaller, the women sometimes took their places with flint-lock and powder-horn. Hulda, the witch, presented herself for this service, but no one wanted her companionship. At last one day a force of British landed from one of the transports that had sailed up the Hudson and commenced a march which was to bring them, by means of the King's highway, to the rear of Putnam's position, at Peekskill. As they marched in imposing array a volley greeted them from behind walls and tree-trunks. It was Lexington repeated in Westchester County. Not to be repulsed this time, Hulda fought with her neighbors, using her rifle with great effect, so that she was singled out for vengeance; and before the redcoats retreated to their boats they had, by means of a sortie, overtaken and killed the witch.

Animated by a new respect, those who had seen her fight avowed that, witch or no witch, she had earned a right to Christian burial. Reverently they carried her to her cabin, and while there discovered between the leaves of her Bible a paper informing them of a little store of gold that she desired to have distributed among the widows whose husbands had fallen for their country.

Hulda's grave, it is said, is close by the north wall of the old church, as though her neighbors, having done her what despite they could during her lifetime, were desirous to atone after her death by an exhibition of hearty respect.

Excerpt from "Chronicles of Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow" Edgar Mayhew Bacon, 1897 (note copied as published)