

Lady Ghost of Hendricks Head Has Become Maine Coast Legend

By Ronald Orchard (Grandson of Charlie Pinkham)

These years she is mostly seen at twilight and so she has become as the Lady of the Dusk. Sometimes she is seen in the very bright moonlight and there are those who swear they have seen her when the fog comes rolling in, picking her steps lightly and easily over the rocky coast, a creature more shadow than substance as befits a ghost.

It is also befitting that she is known as the Lady ghost of the Dark, because the last time she was ever seen alive was at twilight, the chill twilight of a December afternoon in 1931. She had asked her directions to an open sweep of ocean, "to get one last look," because "she was going west."

The ocean encircles Southport Island where Hendricks Head is located. She was told to walk down to the shore just anywhere to look at the ocean. But she said, very politely, that what she wanted was an open sweep of the water and she was told about Hendricks Head, but was warned that darkness might overtake her on the lonely road. It was early December and the afternoon shadows were slanting long, but she started off, down the highway past the shuttered and locked summer cottages and nobody, for certain, ever saw her alive again.

Who was she? The lighthouse keeper thought he saw her that December afternoon. It was almost dark, just last minutes of afterglow before darkness settles down. He was on the lookout for her because he had heard about her, up at Charlie Pinkham's store. The wondering had started even then as to why such a well-spoken woman with that vague label "lady" stamped all over her, should be walking unescorted on a rugged coast that soon would be drowned in darkness.

The lighthouse keeper had added more mystery when he arrived at the store. If she had continued her way to Hendricks head, he had to meet her. He had come directly from his home at the light and he had to pass her somewhere on the road, but he hadn't. So on the way back, he was on the watch for her, a little worried and disturbed as everyone was who had the story and yet, like everybody else, telling himself to mind his own business if a woman wanted to walk down and look at the ocean there was nothing to worry about.

It was almost dark and he was almost home. He knew every inch of the area around him. Through the winter-stripped trees he could see the summer cottages looming up darkly a short distance from the road. He knew all the people who owned those cottages, could tell them from any distance. They came year after year to Southport and were summer neighbors.

And then he saw something flicker just for a second, off near one of the cottages, it was like a shadow, slipping around a corner of a house. He stopped, listened, and called, but there was no answer. Night was coming down fast. He called again, two or three times. If he saw her, he was the last one ever to see her alive. He always was certain that lighthouse keeper that he had seen her, and he forever regretted that he had not stomped through the heavy underbrush to get to the cottage on the shore. The strange thing is that whenever she is seen now, it is usually at the precise moment when the twilight is melting into darkness and she is seen just an instant, so quickly that no one ever is sure that she is there or if it is just a trick of the twilight.

Many stories have sprung up about and around her in the last quarter century. There is the story that her family fortune may have been wiped out in the stock market because obviously she was a woman of breeding and background. But why did no one ever come forward, if she had been from a family of position or wealth? Somewhere, somebody should have recognized her description, noted that she had dropped from sight.

Some say because she was dressed all in black she must have suffered a recent death and could not face life any longer. But again, wouldn't someone had missed her; wouldn't someone have realized she was the woman trying to be identified through the ads in the papers?

Why did she come to Boothbay harbor and Southport? She seemed to know the territory, be familiar with the landmarks. She did nothing, during the few hours she was there to arouse suspicion other than walk off a lonely road in the late afternoon of a December day. And 25 years ago, Southporters and the Harbor knew most of the summer residents. They usually came back year after year. There wasn't the transient travel of today, not in those years. Yet nobody ever came forward who knew her. The name Louise Meade meant nothing to anyone, yet it is an acknowledged fact that even when people assume false names they take one that either has the same initials as their own name or sounds very familiar.

The labels on her clothes, the only identifying mark ever found were Lord and Taylor, the fashionable New York City store. But those labels, never helped at all. Nobody ever found out a thing about her, although detectives

A story persists that a big, black automobile "a limousine" for years was seen driving down the Hendricks Head road and parking near the spot where her body washed ashore. Supposedly, it always comes during the week of December that marks the anniversary of the death of this woman known only as Louise Meade.

Why has no one ever found out who is in the black limousine? Why has the license plate never been checked? These are the same unanswered questions that always surround the stories that begin "somebody said." But whenever the story of Louise Meade is told, that black limousine always crops up, a thread of added mystery in the tale of the Lady of the Dusk.

The black limousine is used by the faction that claim she was mixed up with liquor smuggling, that she had gone down to the coast that late afternoon in 1931 to signal a liquor boat. Remember, that was the Prohibition era and the broken coastline of Maine in those years was a history that has never been written. Those are the ones who say she died because she knew too much or because she double crossed someone.

"Nonsense," says Mrs. Charlie Pinkham of West Southport, who was born a Brewer, and has generations of coastal Maine behind her. "She wasn't that sort, I talked with her. She was a nice woman, a refined woman, a lady!" The stories too have made her a beauty. "She wasn't," says Mrs. Pinkham. "In her 40s I'd say, maybe late 40s. Not a beauty, no but nice looking."

The story of Louise G. Meade begins on the afternoon bus to Boothbay Harbor on Tuesday, December 1, 1931. The day was windy with ominous wind clouds blowing across the sky, but there was sunshine off and on. Although it was December, it was not too cold for Maine, that year, was clinging to late autumn. Nevertheless, it was not the kind of day nor the time of year to lure visitors to the Maine coast. Persons on that bus that afternoon almost 25 years ago were all "natives," getting back home before the short afternoon ended.

Where did she come from to take that bus? Nobody knows. There was nothing about her to attract attention on the bus trip to Boothbay Harbor. A woman all in black, sitting quietly apparently quite certain of every planned detail of her journey.

She checked in the Fullerton Hotel, now no longer operated in the harbor. Again, there was nothing about her to cause any doubts. Anything unusual about a woman checking in at a hotel in a resort town in December? Not at all. She could be on a business trip or looking over summer property as many cottagers do before the Maine winter sets in. Her quiet manner, her composure, her quiet dress gave no reason for any hotel clerk to look at her questioningly.

Later, checking back, they found that she stayed at the hotel but a very short time. She unlocked the suitcase she had brought with her. There was never anything in that case to identify her. Labels had been removed, each and every one with care. The only label ever found was that of Lord and Taylor's on the dress and coat she had on when she washed up on shore. Somehow, those labels had been overlooked.

It was learned too that she had asked several persons where she could get a very good view of the open ocean. The people she had talked with came forward willingly during the investigation to tell all they knew in an effort

to identify her. Those she had talked with in town had told her to go down to the wharfs because there was as good a view as could be found of the famous harbor of Boothbay, but that did not seem to interest her.

She started on the road to Southport and the road curls around the harbor. Although Hendricks Head as the crow flies is "just over there," from Boothbay harbor, it is a hike to undertake on foot, especially on the short afternoon of a windy December day. She knew about Hendricks Head that is for certain, because when she met Mrs. Pinkham the name was not unfamiliar to her.

Mrs. Pinkham was on her shift at the West Southport, Post Office. Until her retirement three years ago, Mrs. Pinkham at the post office 40 years and four months, assisting her husband, Southport's famous Charlie Pinkham, "the fourth selectman."

The afternoon was drawing to a close and it was getting windier and cloudier, so Mrs. Pinkham went over to shut up her hens for the night. Could be, that by morning, snow would be falling. She had just stepped back up to the porch of the store, in those days the West Southport Post Office was part of Charlie Pinkham's general store when she saw the lady in black. The woman was walking along the road almost in front of the store. "She was medium height," recalls Mrs. Pinkham whose memory is sharp as a tack, "and she was dressed in deep black. I remember thinking I had never seen her before and in those days, I knew most everyone who came to Southport, winter or summer."

The woman stopped when she saw Mrs. Pinkham. "I'm on my way to the ocean," she said. "Which way shall I go?" Right across the road from the Pinkham store is the ocean, stretching away to Seguin Light. "Why there's the ocean," said Mrs. Pinkham nodding across the highway. "Yes," the woman looked over her shoulder at the water which narrows to an inlet at the road, "but I want a sweep of the open ocean." "You're near Hendricks Head," Mrs. Pinkham said hesitantly, but it's beginning to get dark, and it's windy, and it's lonesome down there." Hendricks Head? Yes, that was the woman was looking for. How would she get there? Mrs. Pinkham gave her the directions. "It might be dark before you get back," she warned "and it's lonesome."

The woman thanked her and left. Mrs. Pinkham watched for just a second then hurried back to the warmth of the post office. This was no afternoon to visit the open coast of windy Hendricks Head where the surf smashes in even on quiet summer days. As the wind heightened and the clouds thickened Mrs. Pinkham thought of the woman walking along the road to the Light. She discussed it with her husband. They weren't disturbed, but it seemed a little strange.

"You didn't know her?" said Charlie. "No," said his wife, "I never saw her before." Mrs. Pinkham was keeping an eye on the highway to watch for the woman's return. She didn't like the idea of a woman on that road on such a dark, windy night, as this one was promising to be.

Then Mr. Knight, keeper of the Hendricks Head Light arrived at the post-office-store. The minute he came in Mrs. Pinkham asked him if he had met the woman on the road. "I didn't meet anyone." "But you couldn't have missed her. She couldn't get down past your road this fast." "I didn't see a soul," insisted Keeper Knight. He listened to the story. A worried look came over his face. A couple of more people arrived at the store. They heard it, Mrs. Pinkham kept repeating the woman's description. Nobody seemed to know her, yet these people would have sworn they knew everyone on Southport. "I'll keep an eye out for her on the way back home," said Keeper Knight. "Kind of funny, isn't it?"

Retraced Her Journey - Later of course, when they retraced her footsteps easily followed in the sandy soil. They found that Mr. Knight had walked right by her. She must have heard him coming, long before he came into sight on that quiet road. He was hurrying along, not giving a thought to meeting anyone, and she had dodged into the woods on the north side of the road near the top of Beach Hill. She had stood there, quietly, watching him walk by and when his footsteps had died away up the road, she had stepped out of the woods and continued her journey, but it was later that was discovered.

On his return trip that night, Keeper Knight kept a sharp eye out as he walked. Darkness was closing in. He knew that road, like the palm of his hand, and he kept scanning the roadside, listening intently, trying to make out any strange sounds above the noise of the rising wind and the wash of the tide.

The lights of his own home were in view when a movement way in at the shore, near one of the cottages, caught his eye. He barely saw it, but he could swear it was a person, a woman moving swiftly, maybe running. He shouted. He shouted a couple of times. It was almost too dark now, to see anything clearly. There were the lights of his own home. If she were down here she could see those lights and be guided. And even if he went in there, it would be too dark now to see anything. Anyway, if she was in there she would have answered him.

He was home in a matter of minutes and he told his wife about the woman and about the movement he thought he saw. It was really dark now. His wife had not seen anyone on the road. They agreed he couldn't have seen anything near that cottage and yet both of them were worried.

"Curious" - By the next morning, everyone in Southport was a "little worried." That woman in black had not returned. "We became curious," is the way Charlie Pinkham puts it, so Willis Brewer, a Southport fisherman, went looking for her. He had no trouble picking up her tracks. He found where she had stepped off the woods up at Beach Hill. And then he followed her path to the beach where since -- they have always believed -- she probably watched the water.

The sound of Mr. Knight's returning footsteps must have disturbed her. At least that is how Charlie Pinkham has figured it out and he is no Sunday-detective. Charlie has come up with some pretty good solutions to many coastal mysteries, has unraveled many tangled clues that have tripped up some of the smart city boys.

"I figure," he says, "when she heard Mr. Knight returning, you know how sounds travel near the water, she took the road to Salt Pond. Then she returned to follow the road over by the Conner cottage to the opening in the stone wall.

"That's one-third of the way from Connors' to the Light House. She must have seen the lights in the Light House residence, the Knight's home, because she retraced her steps about 100 feet, then went west down on the little beach west of the Connors' garage." (The "Connors' cottage" is a beautiful residence that stands on a rocky cliff looking across the ocean to Five Islands. When they say cottage down in this part of the world, it often can well be a mansion-Ed. note.)

Maybe she watched Mr. Knight walk home, barely making out his figure in the growing darkness. Certainly, she heard him call because he shouted several times. There has never been any doubt in the minds of those who tried to solve the case that the movement Keeper Knight saw was Louise Meade. Evidently, she had thought the dusk was deep enough to hide her and, too late, realized he would see her so she had slipped around the side of the house and that was when he saw her.

The general theory is that she drowned herself. She is listed in the medical records as suicide, Charlie Pinkham goes along with the latter, but not with the first.

Charlie Pinkham's Solution - "My theory, and mind you, this is just my own theory, is that she sat on the beach and took poison. No autopsy was performed so there was no proof. But here's how I figure it. When she was found it was in a spot a few feet south of this beach. She had a leather belt fastened around her wrists and then the belt was run through the handles of an electric flatiron, that was to weight her down, and through the handles of her handbag. One hand was hooked on her belt. The other hand, the thumb, was inside the catch of her bag which was partially opened.

"Now I've seen plenty of drownings, some accidental, some not. And I've yet to see a person who cast himself into the water, regardless of how great was his desire to die, but what at the last moment, when it was too late, that will to live made him reach out, trying to grab back life." "This woman's hands had not moved. That's why I always will believe it was poison. The tide would take her out into the water. The iron would weigh her down."

They retraced her steps, but they could not find her and all that week, the worry grew. By then they knew about her checking in at the hotel in the Harbor. The entire community was watching for her. They found her on Sunday, Dec. 6, 1931.

The Search - Charlie Pinkham, who among all his other duties for years has been one of the guiding lights of the Southport Volunteer Fire Department, goes on with his story: "After six or seven days I asked some of the firemen to help search the shore so on Sunday, Dec. 6th I took one or two men and scanned the shore, starting at North Beach, following west and north."

"Stanley Orchard with other firemen started at South Beach, going west and north. Stanley arrived at the ledge south of the little sand beach at about the time I arrived on the ledge north end of the little beach. Stanley was gazing into the water and all of a sudden said: "There she is!"

"The undertow was washing the body up near the surface, then letting it back into the depression about six feet under at that time of tide. I asked the fellows to keep an eye on the body while I rushed for the lighthouse to obtain line and hook to throw over to catch her clothing.

"By the time I returned the men had hailed Link Webber in his boat. He came and took Hiram Moore and Scott Gray aboard. They fastened a line around the body and towed it in on the North Beach. The bag left at the hotel, as well as the one fastened to her belt, did not have any evidence as to who she was or where she came from. She was well dressed in black from Lord and Taylors, New York City. No evidence whatsoever was found to identify this woman, who may or may not have been Louise G. Meade."

They tried to identify her. Before it was over, detectives came down from New York City, her description was broadcast to every police department. People were interviewed. Missing Persons Bureau was checked and rechecked. Newspapers carried the story. Every day a "sure lead" would develop only to get nowhere. Nobody ever came forward to say they ever had even heard of this well-dressed, well-spoken, well-behaved gentlewomen.

Finally, on January 8, 1932, the Town of Southport buried her. They buried her in the old, old cemetery on the road to Hendricks Head. Names on the monuments in that cemetery are names noted in Maine history, sea captains, early settlers, Southporters. There is no Potter's Field in this town. There is no need for one. So they took the woman known as Louise Meade to "their" cemetery and gave her a decent burial.

Not Forgotten - The only markings on her grave are a few field stones, put there mainly to mark a grave site. Already many of the younger generation do not even know where the lady in black is buried. Charlie Pinkham can take you right to the spot. It is under a giant tree, a little off to one side because this is a cemetery of families and the only place for a single grave is "off to one side."

"Wouldn't think a person could just drop from sight like that, would you?" says Charlie Pinkham. "But she did. Nobody ever came forward to claim one thing about her. Lord knows, we advertised. Kinda funny, when you think about it."

The quarter of a century since she "dropped from sight" has been an eventful one and the woman known as Louise Meade could well be forgotten under ordinary circumstances. But there was nothing ordinary about this woman's impact on Southport Island. She isn't forgotten and she comes back.

Of late years she is seen usually only at deep dusk, down around Hendricks Head. Not always in the same place. Some people say they have seen her in the bright moonlight, that dazzling white moonlight that bounces off the sea. And a lot of people claim the fog brings her back. They say they have seen her when those thick, pea soup fogs roll in and the fog horns start talking up and down the coast.

Why does she come back? What brings her back to Hendricks Head? What took her there in the first place? Who is she, this lady with only a field stone to mark her home in eternity?

Most people see her in that last few minutes of twilight when the first stars are beginning to brighten and everything looks a little blurred, a little strange. That is when she comes back most often, picking her way over the rocks, moving along toward the water, so intent on what she is doing, that she seems not to care if she is glimpsed for a second as she goes on her journey.

Her grave, in time, may be forgotten. But she never will be forgotten, because already she is a Maine Coast legend, this shadowy figure, the Lady of the Dusk who haunts Hendricks Head.

A Note to the Reader - This story was written for the Lewiston Journal, magazine section, on July 14, 1956. This appeared 25 years after the event happened. Since the story was written, an unmarked stone has been placed on her grave. The grave is located in Union Cemetery, in West Southport.

In an article featured in the magazine, Down East, titled "Living in a Lighthouse" -- July 1984, in speaking with Mary Charbonneau, (the owner of Hendricks Head Lighthouse at the time), the following was written: A grand limousine periodically pulled up to the mysterious lady's gravesite in the Southport Cemetery, and Mary remembers, "With every visit, someone in the car left fresh flowers on the grave."