

# *Obituary*

Michael Paul Simons

## **Hag-Witch of Nikwasi Dies**

**H**arriet Claudia Collins went to her lord October 17, 2009. The cause of death remains unknown, though an autopsy is pending. County Coroner Tom Ward speculates failure of the liver.

Collins's age is not known at this time.

A visibly shaken Mathew Phillips, 6, discovered the body in the middle of Main Street yesterday morning.

Few knew her by name. Immediately recognizable by her Army jacket, red canvas sneakers, and white-rimmed sunglasses, Collins was a mainstay of Main Street.

"She always, always wore the sunglasses, even on cloudy days, even at night," said Debbie Beaumont (née Wilcox). "She never took them off."

Collins never asked for handouts, though people nevertheless handed her things.

"Blankets. Soup. Money. That sort of thing," said Cilia Moore,

a life-long resident of Nikwasi and devout member of the First Methodist Church. “At the Apple Festival last year, I spotted several folks rush up to her with cider. You couldn’t imagine.”

“She was always picking junk off the sidewalk. I never seen her do anything except throw it into the nearest trash. I just assumed she was looking for food, you know, foraging,” observed one local merchant who declined to be identified, adding, “I like to think of it as community service.”

In recent years, Collins frequented a soup kitchen sponsored by the First Methodist Church. Reverend James Bryson, presently on a mission to serve needy Nicaraguan orphans, was unavailable for comment. Interim minister Daniel Brown declined to speak on record.

“We fed her like anybody else,” said Moore. “I do hope she’s in a better place.”

Moore described Collins’s church attendance as “sporadic.”

“A quiet woman. She kept to herself,” said Moore. “Oftentimes, you’d find her staring transfixed at what we call our rose window. She just had that doomed look about her.”

Moore could not comment on whether Collins ever removed her sunglasses: “Some say she did. I never saw. The Bible says that eyes are the mirrors to the soul.”

“Frankly, we found her to be a bit spooky,” continued Moore. “She wouldn’t sing with the choir so much as mouth along, and you probably know how rank and sour-smelling her breath was, and how she sometimes even smelled like soiled diapers.”

Other church members commenting off-the-record described Collins’s odor as “foul,” “disturbing,” and even “unholy.”

“We prayed for her. We tried reaching out,” Moore said. “How great is that darkness?”

It is not clear when Collins became known as the Hag-Witch of Nikwasi.

Children have always seemed particularly drawn to Collins.

For over two decades, every unattractive or unpopular kid in town has been alleged of either being Collins’s love child or having had sexual congress with her. One popular rumor among school children has been that after a boy lies down with her, he reports the

scars of a severed penis.

Dressed as Collins, Debbie Beaumont (née Wilcox) won first place in the town Halloween costume competition several years ago, to great applause. The Hag-Witch has been a popular costume in almost every age division each year since.

“I can’t explain [the costume’s] popularity,” said Beaumont. Beaumont also couldn’t explain how she’d decided to dress as Collins.

Unexplained occurrences have frequently coincided with events in Collins’s life. In the late seventies, two children were born without arms the same night Collins had been locked up for drunken and disorderly behavior. In the mid-eighties, the ceiling to the Armory collapsed during the junior prom.

Mike Evans claims to have rented to Collins a one-bedroom cottage off China Spring Road.

A former tenant farmer dwelling, the cottage appears half sunk in the ground. The moss-covered roof sags noticeably. Additionally, the damp give of the ground sucks at your boots as you approach. At night the green glow of foxfire leads you to her mushroom-fringed door.

Evans characterized her as “a real good tenant.” He claims that every month “a check arrives from Connecticut.” Evans claims he’s paid twice market value and that he has “no complaints.”

He dismissed her Hag-Witch status as “a load of bull.”

Others strongly disagree with Evans’s assessment.

“Harriet Claudia Collins belonged to this community as much or more than most,” Marshall Dolive, adjunct professor of English at Rutherford Community College, wrote in an email. “Strictly speaking, she may not actually be dead. More precisely she’s hibernating. A circadian rhythm governs entities like Collins. They sleep for generations then rise up as if from the dead after a generation or two. Every town requires an ancient evil to surface in roughly fifty year cycles, though you’ll experience some variation. Typically, they take corporeal form and walk among the God-fearing citizenry, feeding off the collective fear. Generally, it’s best to keep careful notes on their activity ....

“These entities possess only the shape of eyes—carved out

abysses predating recorded historical time. Crucial point: you go looking into that dark crevice and there's no telling how that will affect you .... Tendrils seize onto the imaginations of the population, and thus begins the slow crush. They operate powerful mind control techniques using insect populations to transmit their commands. This explains why so many people go up and give [Collins] offerings—they have no choice. They are compelled to do so .... [Collins] is not so much a woman as she is a fish-like goddess worshiped in primitive times, now long forgotten, and vengeful. Try to sever her completely from the fabric of our community and the repercussions would be unfathomable.”

Professor Dolive, author of “A History of Sabbaticals” and co-author of “Hematophagous Mechanisms of the Rhynchobdellida Order,” is currently writing a thriller entitled “Coagulation!”

Throughout history, the Hag-Witch has plagued the town in many guises.

Christopher Clark, a current resident of Bethlehem Senior Center, claims to have never met Collins but saw the Hag-Witch as a young man.

(In a measure of full disclosure, Christopher Clark is distantly related to the writer.)

“I looked her in the eye and wish I hadn't.”

Clark described the Hag-Witch as a beautiful young woman with long dark hair, pale skin, and dark and beautiful eyes who bewitched all the young men in town.

“Drove them to ruin,” he said. “I looked her in the eye, and now I'm a hundred and eight.”

Clark attributes his long life to this occurrence. “I saw her in the middle of a field. Completely naked. A horned owl flew out of her stomach.”

Clark's hair turned white overnight. “I was a young man, seventeen, eighteen. And I've been an old man every day since.

“I suppose you can say I'm her bridegroom.”

He warned young boys attempting to frighten each other to “be careful. You don't want to end up living forever.”

For now, though, authorities are deciding how best to deal with the body.

“We’re not real sure whether she had any close relatives. We’re, of course, pursuing this Connecticut connection,” said a deputy from the Sheriff’s Office. “But, I’d just like to add that, in the end, we all survived her.”

Collins spoke on the record only once in response to our “Views from Main Street” feature. That week’s question: What do you think we’ll find when we open the time capsule next week? Her answer: Some yellowed letters and a key to the kingdom.