

Does Hell Town really deserve its name?

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Hell Town – When darkness falls and black fingers of horror claw through this mist-shrouded valley, spirits of the dead rise from their graves. Satan worshippers celebrate midnight candlelight masses in country churches marked by inverted crosses. The screaming ghosts of murdered children ride for eternity in a spectral school bus. Abandoned houses are haunted by mutant humans deformed by toxic chemical spills that forced them from their homes. Motorists lost on lonely wooded lanes are dragged from their cars and slain by an ax-wielding madman.

Well, not really.

The stories are among many tales spun during the past 30 years about an area dubbed “Hell Town” – a section of northern Summit County encompassing Boston Township, Boston, Peninsula, Sagamore Hills and Northfield Center Township.

Like many ghost stories, some of these myths are based on small bits of reality twisted into far-fetched fiction. Once passed along by word of mouth, they now move and multiply with the speed of a keystroke and Internet efficiency.

But it’s not the stories that bother James Willis, 34, founder of Ghosts of Ohio, a Columbus-based, nonprofit group dedicated to researching alleged hauntings in the state. Willis said what really rattles his chains is the tendency of some thrill seekers – hoping to personally experience these legends – to trespass, vandalize and harass residents living in that area. Not to mention giving serious paranormal investigation a bad name.

So this past week, Willis posted 16 Hell Town legends and his responses debunking those tales under the “Vicious Rumors” section of the organization’s Web site (www.ghostsofohio.org).

The “haunted school bus”? A bus once converted to temporary housing by a homeowner remodeling his house.

The Boston Cemetery ghost who sits on a bench and stares “blankly into creation”? There is no bench at the cemetery.

The upside-down church crosses? A common element of Gothic revival architecture.

Willis said many of the Hell Town stories probably arose in the 1970s, when the federal government was purchasing homes and acreage to create the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. There once had been a chemical dump in the area, and many of the houses bought by the park were boarded-up and marked with U.S. government “No trespassing” signs – hence the “Mutant Town” tales.

‘Peninsula Python’

The area is no stranger to myth and legend. In 1945, rumors of a giant snake (the “Peninsula Python”) that supposedly escaped from a carnival truck that crashed in the area sent posses of armed residents out scouring farm fields for the slithering horror (which was never found). The python was a hoax, dreamed up by a Cleveland Press reporter, but people reported seeing it.

Longtime area resident Claire Rodhe can’t recall any old local legends except for the python tale, and one her mother once told her about the man who walks along Riverview Rd. and suddenly disappears.

But she’s heard of some of the recent Hell Town tales and seen the results in the Boston Cemetery, whose caretakers have included her grandfather, father and now her husband, Tom. One year, 13 old

tombstones were broken by nocturnal intruders, she said.

As for ghosts lounging there on benches, she noted, "I've lived here all my life and I've never seen a bench or a ghost in that cemetery."

In recent years, the Internet has fanned interest in Hell Town tales, according to Randy Bergdorf, 39, Boston Township Trustees chairman and curator of the Peninsula Library & Historical Society. With that interest has come kids in cars, searching the area for haunted sites year-round, but particularly at Halloween, he said.

When they don't find them, Bergdorf suspects some make their own excitement – such as breaking old headstones at Boston Cemetery. "We had to install dusk-to-dawn floodlights [at the cemetery]," he said. "Now how crazy is that? There's nobody there who needs the light."

Though the Summit County Sheriff's Department increases its patrol presence in the area at this time of year, Bergdorf worries that someday the popularity of cruising dark, unfamiliar roads, searching for spooks, will lead to real tragedy.

For now, it's mostly annoying, Bergdorf said. He told how he and other residents are sometimes approached by visitors asking directions to "the slaughterhouse" or other supposed local horror sites. "Most folks don't know what the heck they're talking about, 'cause this [legend] stuff is all in cyberspace," he said.

Laura Rodhe, 37, of Boston, said she was shoveling snow from her driveway one winter when a man stopped his car to ask if she was one of those local Satan worshippers he'd heard about. "I wish I'd had my fake glow-in-the-dark eyeballs with me. I would've said, Yes, come here," she said, chuckling. But, "you more or less get used to it," she added. "They're mostly kids. They're harmless."

Bullet hole

In fact, if you want to hear some weird stories, she'll tell you about the doors and windows that keep closing and locking themselves in her house. Or the patched hole where a family ancestor fired a shot through a bedroom ceiling after hearing noises in the attic. Or the ghost she once saw sitting in one of the houses at nearby Hale Farm & Village.

On the Web site Creepy Cleveland (www.eriellink.com), where readers offer their own descriptions and experiences regarding area haunts, tales about Hell Town are second in popularity only to the "melon heads" (people with abnormally large heads) of Kirtland.

Site founder Chuck Hawley, 32, of Fairview Park said Creepy Cleveland doesn't give directions to supposed haunts, and "I never encourage anybody to go out at all, let alone try something like a ritual or bother anybody."

Hawley said the site is not intended to prove or disprove a story: "I just put it out there and let people think what they think."

He has visited the area described as Hell Town, and can understand why it has become such a popular locale for supernatural speculation. "Boston is a gloomy little town, very quiet . . . and really eerie the way the fog rolls in," he said. "It's the perfect setting for a horror story, and I can see why people want to believe there's something out there."

Willis, of Ghosts of Ohio, also senses something odd about the area. But he describes it as a "certain sadness," a lingering sense of loss felt by residents whose neighbors and friends had to move out when the national park moved in.

"And if that wasn't enough, now they are being told they live in Hell Town," Willis said. "And that is why the senseless vandalism and trespassing needs to stop now."

“Because while we can’t change what has happened to these people in the past, we can offer them hope for the future.”

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