

NORTHEAST OHIO'S SPOOKIEST SPOTS

Ghosts, haunts and urban legends

Tuesday, October 31, 2000

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PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

Cleveland ghost hunter John Lingenfelter III always had a strange feeling about Gore Orphanage in Vermilion. The place is now just an empty field next to a ravine on Gore Orphanage Rd., about a mile north of the Ohio Turnpike in Lorain County. But for decades, it has been the first stop on any tour of Northeast Ohio's spookiest spots – a magnet for hobbyists, occultists and partiers, each trying to catch a buzz off some paranormal activity. As haunts go, it's shrouded in more than the usual legend. There's the tale about the fire that destroyed the orphanage in 1923, when a child dropped a lantern on a bale of hay and transformed 120 unfortunates into screaming balls of fire. There's the story of the ghosts who guard the grounds with cries and shrieks. And the legend of the Headless Biker who lurks in the woods, adopting wandering souls for his home, hell.

One October day, Lingenfelter felt compelled to see for himself. And upon entering, he saw a boy – about 7 or 8 years old – standing there. Then a name – “Jacob” – flashed in his head. Was this just a kid playing in the woods? Or something else? Lingenfelter says he got his answer after listening to a tape recording he had made of the trip. “There were all these low, whispering voices and cries,” he says. “Kids screaming Help me!’ and a German woman pleading, Leave the children.” That was all the proof he needed.

City of the dead

The allure of Gore Orphanage is hardly a mystery, according to Bill Ellis, professor of English and American studies at Penn State University at Hazleton, Pa., and author of “What Really Happened at Gore Orphanage.” Gore is the quintessential urban legend, a compelling mix of fact and fiction. Children did die on the grounds, of diphtheria, and there once was an orphanage there – but it closed long before a fire burned the empty shell to the ground. As a result, the story plays to myths and fears of displacement, disease and death. It's the 3-Ds that make Northeast Ohio such a hotbed for ghosts and ghost hunters alike. Consider these other examples of haunted Cleveland:

- In Drury House, a Euclid Ave. mansion built in 1912 by industrialist Francis Drury, there's a ghost with dark hair and a flowing gown that regularly makes cameos, only to vanish in a flame. Some say, she “moved in” after perishing in the Cleveland Clinic fire of 1929.
- In Cleveland's Federal Reserve Bank, there's Matilda, the ghost dressed in 1920s flapper garb who lost it all – life included – in the 1929 stock market crash. Allegedly, she continues to draw a dividend by stalking employees.
- In Erie Street Cemetery, there's Joc-o-Sot, the Sauk chief who turned a boneyard into a field of screams. He died in 1844, from complications of an old bullet wound suffered during the Black Hawk Wars of 1831. Though Joc-o-Sot, who succumbed while touring Europe in a Wild West show, wanted to be buried among his tribesmen in Minnesota and Wisconsin, he made it only as far as Cleveland. According to ghostmongers, that is why his soul wanders, why his tombstone is cracked and why he continues to haunt his across-the-street neighbors, the Cleveland Indians.

Community spirits

What came first, the ghost or the story? According to Chris Woodyard, author of four “Haunted Ohio” books and “Ghost Hunter’s Guide to Ohio,” ghost legends are a strange brew of ghosts and the people who tell them. “Every community has a house that always seems to be for sale – a place no one wants to live in,” said Woodyard. “People assume it’s haunted, especially if its really old-looking. It just screams haunted.”

On Cleveland’s West Side, Franklin Castle has been screaming like crazy. Built in 1864 by a German banker named Hannes Tiedemann, the 26-room mansion has hosted dozens of owners and an orgy of alleged mayhem. In the 1800s, Tiedemann is said to have murdered daughters and lovers alike. Before World War II, Nazi militants allegedly liquidated 20 Socialists there. In recent decades, a doctor allegedly used it to store human bones. When the mansion was set on fire by an arsonist last year, it was hardly a surprise that many a ghostmonger assumed the blaze was the work of its only permanent resident, Rebecca the ghost.

Franklin Castle may boast the action, but Squire’s Castle, in the North Chagrin Reservation of the Cleveland Metroparks, offers enough atmosphere to scare a spook. Built at the turn of the century by English-born oil baron Feargus Squire, the turreted castle is allegedly haunted by the sleepwalking ghost of Mrs. Squire.

According to legend, she was awakened one autumn night by howling wolves. After a mad dash around the house, she stumbled down the basement stairs, only to make a perfect landing: her slender little neck in the noose of a dangling rope.

Ingrid D’ Ambrosio, information specialist for the Cleveland Metroparks, scoffs at the story. She contends that while the Squires built the now popular attraction, they never actually lived there – and that there is no such late-night spirit.

But I’m not so sure.

Last time I checked into Squire’s Castle, it was downright ghostly. It looked like something out of a European horror story – dark and cold with black birds perched on top, the woods rustling, the moon creeping over the horizon. The spirit summoned me inside. And I found my proof lying there on the floor: a couple of empty cans of Budweiser and some cigarette butts.

Man, that Mrs. Squire sure likes to party.

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