

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--HAUNTED PLACES--MALLORY

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

Respectable people ought to know better, you might say.
But spirits do fly high during Halloween.
Strange, inexplicable things do occur.
And, believe them or not, close encounters of the spooky kind do
conjure up quiver-in-your-boots, shiver-up-your-spine stories of...

Haunted Places

or

Rooms With A Ghost

-OR-

Respectable people ought to know better, you might say.
But spirits do fly high this time of year. Strange, inexplicable things do occur.
And, believe them or not, close encounters of the spooky kind do
conjure up quiver-in-your-boots, shiver-up-your-spine stories of...

Halloween 365 Days a Year

When youngsters don spook suits and goblin gear this Halloween, they won't be trick-or-treating at the bar in San Antonio's historic Menger Hotel... but some believe the ghost of Teddy Roosevelt might! Steeped in tradition, the 1859 hotel has levitated a downright spooky reputation.

For years, people reported a mysterious "lady in blue" walking the hallways. Others saw what they considered the ghost of chambermaid Sallie White, whose husband killed her in the hotel in 1876. **(Malacara, Williams)** Then tales of Teddy's ghost rode onto the scene.

In 1898 the president-to-be spent hours in the Menger's bar recruiting Rough Riders for the Spanish-American War. Decades after his death, an electric service bell near the front desk began ringing unpredictably...even though it had long been disconnected! Hotel staff wondered if Teddy's demanding spirit might be back. Last year in the bar, well after closing time, a janitor noticed a fellow dressed in antiquated military clothing. By the time the panicked employee scrambled for help, the "Rough Rider" had vanished, says assistant manager Ernesto Malacara. He adds that such sightings draw both believers and the merely curious to the Menger. "Sometimes guests ask for rooms with a ghost. Well, we don't know of any exactly, but nothing bad has happened, so people have a good time with it." **(Malacara, Williams)** Phantom fans had a field day last Halloween when 30 uniformed actors marched into the Menger, led by Tom Berenger portraying Teddy Roosevelt, as crews filmed the TNT mini-series, "The Rough Riders," which aired in July. **(Schroeder, Malacara, Godoy)**

Quirky In Corpus

Scenes eerie enough for Hollywood surfaced aboard the aircraft carrier USS Lexington, now a naval museum in Corpus Christi. "This 54-year-old ship has lots of moans and groans, so I was skeptical of ghost stories," says ship historian Judith Whipple. Sightings by visitors last year, however, changed her mind.

In the engine room a teenager, his mother, and a friend watched a fog or smoke transform into the image of a young man. Later in the same spot, a Galveston couple confronted a sailor dressed in blue dungarees and white t-shirt sitting oddly on top of an engine. "Why are you up there?" the man asked. At that, the sailor slid or jumped off. Hurrying to see if he was hurt, the tourists found no one. **(Whipple)**

On the mess deck (where sailors ate meals), a San Antonio couple approached another uniformed figure who ordered the husband to "get that cap off!" As the figure walked by, the husband, hat now in hand, and his wife turned only to find an empty walkway. Historian Whipple notes that only officers could wear hats below deck during the service years (1943-1991) of the Lexington, ironically nicknamed *Blue Ghost* when Japan repeatedly boasted of sending her to a watery grave during World War II. **(Whipple, Williams, Texas State Travel Guide)**

Weird In Waxahachie

Few supposedly haunted places have capitalized on their supernatural standings like a historic home turned restaurant in Waxahachie called Catfish Plantation.

In the waiting room, patrons leaf through binders full of accounts-- including photos--of uncanny happenings in the cajun food eatery. Skeptical of spirits at first, owners Tom and Melissa Baker now engage guests in the specter

search, encouraging them to take photos and notes. Soon after they bought the 1895 house 13 years ago, odd occurrences began. Cups inexplicably flew across rooms. Faucets turned off and on unassisted. Broken antique clocks started chiming upredictably.

"Psychics say we have three spirits," reports Melissa. "Elizabeth was strangled in the house on her wedding day. The other two, Caroline, an elderly woman, and Will, a farmer, once lived here. They used to be like mischievous kids trying to get our attention. It has evolved into a friendship."

Friendly, but freaky. Opening up early one morning, Melissa found a freshly-made pot of coffee waiting for her, though no one had been in the place all night. Visitors often report cold spots in otherwise warm rooms--standard signs of apparitions, say parapsychologists. One patron even claimed a ring fell out of thin air next to her table. The ring bore badly-worn initials which the Bakers say match ghost Caroline's maiden name. **(Bakers, Myers, Hauk)**

Bizarre In Boerne

Another small-town restaurant bears its notoriety in its name, the Country Spirit. Located in Boerne, the two-story mansion (ca. 1872) has long been the site of curious capers. A month after opening in 1984, owner Sue Martin and three others witnessed a candle move by itself across a table. Beer spigots turned on by themselves. Sounds of footsteps and people laughing emanated from vacant locked rooms.

Sue says her place has a playful spirit named David, a teenager who died in an accident there in the late 1890s. Psychics who claim the ability to see ghosts recently spotted two more. Fred, an old man in a floppy hat, warned of dangerous electrical problems, which, indeed, an inspection uncovered. The other "new ghost" once owned the house, Sue believes. "Augusta Phillip Graham

lived here 20 years and loved the house so much that even in death apparently doesn't want to leave." **(Martin, Williams)**

A long-gone former resident may linger at another site down the street from the Country Spirit. "When people ask about our ghost, we always tell them the stories," says Louise Foster, director of the Boerne Public Library, located in the historic Dienger Building. "Some believe it, some don't. You have to make up your own mind."

Civic leader Joseph Dienger built the cut limestone structure in 1884 as a mercantile store and residence. When workers converted his bedroom into a bar in the 1960s, owners at the time decided the spirit of Mr. Dienger, a teetotaler, disapproved. Doors slammed. Windows rattled. Lights turned on and off. Doors locked on their own. Eventually, the proprietor set a table for Mr. Dienger outside his former bedroom as a gesture of goodwill...apparently to no avail.

In 1991 the building became the public library. "At our grand opening party, we had wine for refreshments," Louise, the library director, confirms. "The next morning, we found books piled in the middle of the floor. Three other times at opening, we found books protruding two inches from the same shelves at a spot in the biography section where books can't be pushed through accidentally from the other side." **(Foster, Williams, Syers)**

Jittery In Jefferson

Haunted or not, few Texas places look the part more than historic Jefferson. A bustling inland port a century ago, the town died almost overnight when riverboat traffic dried up. Some say railroad mogul Jay Gould also put a curse on Jefferson when it spurned his proposal for rail service. Gould's line bypassed town, contributing to its demise. Today, old homes and Southern

charm make Jefferson a bed and breakfast haven...and, some say, a place where visitors experience more than meets the eye.

Hollywood mogul Steven Spielberg visited Jefferson in the Seventies researching sites for his movie, "Sugarland Express." In the legendary Excelsior House Hotel late one night, the producer of "Poltergeist" had a feeling someone loomed over him. Walking into an unnaturally cold spot, he immediately roused his cohorts and headed for the nearest chain motel 20 miles away.

(Tarpley, McMillen, Hammons, Fowler)

The old Jefferson Hotel (1861) also sports cold spots--particularly in Room 19, where guests often get uneasy feelings and ask to switch rooms, usually in the dead of night. Once a security guard checking a vacant room felt something pulling against the door as he tried to close it on his way out. A unearthly tug-of-war ensued--the door moving back and forth--and the guard's perplexity turned to anger. With a final jerk, he slammed the door shut. As he hurried off, something banged loudly on the door from inside the empty room.

Earlier this year, clerk Jodi Breckenridge heard the light switch click on in a bathroom off the lobby. Certain she was alone, she clicked the light off...only to have it click on again minutes later. "Around five or six o'clock every few days," Jodi adds, "you hear the stairs squeaking as if someone's on them, but nobody's there." New hotel owners Ron and Carol Misener considered rebuilding the noisy stairs during recent renovations. But so many guests said they enjoy the mysterious steps, the Miseners decided to keep the squeaking...and whatever causes it.

(Miseners, Breckenridge, McMillen)

One of Jefferson's spookiest places serves up hauntings with haute cuisine. "We're known for our fine food and spirits," jokes Patrick Hopkins, chef and co-owner of The Grove Restaurant. But he's dead serious about the 1861 structure's

reported dozen or so ghosts...including a dog. "During restoration, a worker quit after a foggy figure walked up to him but no one was there. Others heard steps when they were alone. Some heard a dog growling. After we opened in 1991, a waitress even saw a dog leap out of the shadows, but it wasn't there," Patrick explains. Later that night, he says a guest took a wedding party snapshot and later reported that a dog showed up in the print. In duplicates of the mysterious photo, however, no dog's image appeared, adds Patrick with a grin.

Patrick had his own close encounter of the spooky kind in 1992. "I was polishing the trunk of Louise Young, who lived here many years before her death, when I saw a lady in a long white dress with puffed sleeves walk by," he recalls. "She pulled up her dress slightly, and I saw her high button-up shoes. I followed her into the dining room but found myself alone."

The lady in white reappeared during rehearsals for a dinner theater Patrick hosts several times a year at The Grove. "A crew member saw the lady in white outside. He ran after her but found no one there," Patrick explains. "That same night an actress spoke to a lady in white who promptly disappeared. Some people have Halloween once a year, but we have it 365 days a year!"

Spooked in San Antone

The spirit of Halloween also hovers year-round over San Antonio historian and tour guide Docia Schultz Williams, who has parlayed public interest in poltergeists into a prolific writing career. "On my tours of the Alamo and other old sites people always asked about ghost stories, so I finally began researching the topic," says the ghost writer. "The more I dug, the more fascinated I got." The result: four spook books--*Spirits of San Antonio and South Texas*, *Ghosts Along the Texas Coast*, *Phantoms of the Plains*, and *When Darkness Falls*. **[Note: This last book is supposed to be out by Oct., so please verify during**

fact check.] Docia also leads group-only night tours of ghostly goings-on around town.

One of her frequent haunts remains the Alamo Street Theatre and Restaurant, located in the King William District. Marcia Larsen and late husband Bill transformed a 1912 Mission Style church into a dinner theater with a twist. During rehearsals and shows, a woman in a white Victorian dress often appears in the auditorium's balcony, a former choir loft. Marcia thinks it's the spirit of Miss Margaret Gething, a turn-of-the-century stage singer/actress who lived nearby. Directors have heard "Shhh" whispered in their ears during noisy moments of stage action. During one performance, a smoky shape moved slowly across the stage, says Marcia. "We've had chairs levitate, blenders turn on by themselves. We're always hearing footsteps upstairs or getting reports of someone waving from the belfry when no one's really up there."

Vivid imaginations? Hallucinations? Too many viewings of "Angels in the Outfield" or "Ghost Busters?"

Whatever the case, ghost stories seem to have a life of their own at numerous historic sites around the state. "There's no need for histrionics," says author Docia Williams. "People report strange things that are interesting enough on their own."

Adds Ernesto Malacara of the Menger Hotel: "I'm sure some people don't tell what they've witnessed because they're embarrassed. But I believe it's real. Why not? We're right in the middle of a lot of history. The spirits of people from the past just don't want leave, I guess."