

10-25-1997

Hunter of Midwest Hauntings

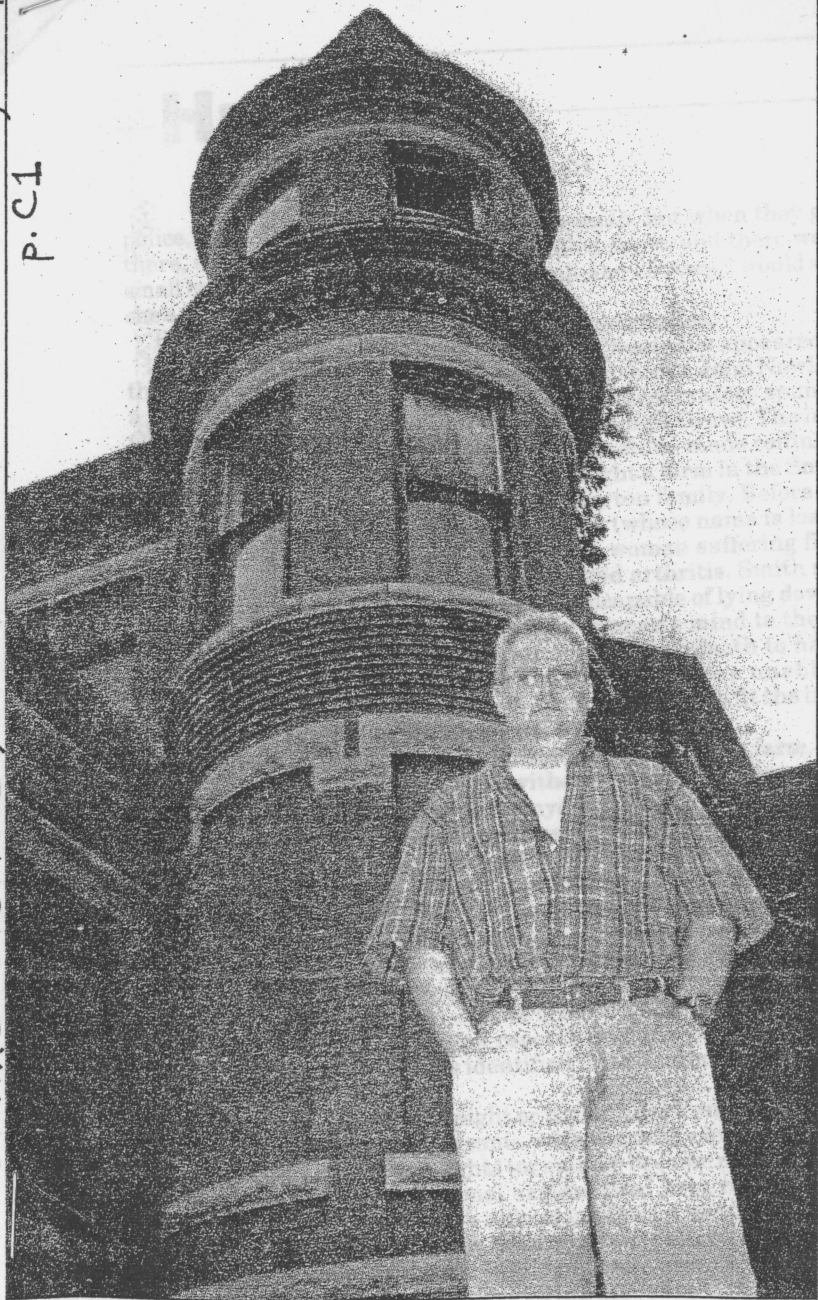
Times-Courier

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/pemberton_hall_ghost

Recommended Citation

Times-Courier, "Hunter of Midwest Hauntings" (1997). *The Pemberton Hall Ghost*. 3.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/pemberton_hall_ghost/3

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Pemberton Hall at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Pemberton Hall Ghost by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.



Hunter of Midwest hauntings

Troy Taylor is East Central Illinois' expert on paranormal activity

By JOE RICHARDSON
Illinois Country Living

Troy Taylor stands atop a 19th-century stone staircase in the middle of a cemetery beginning at the end of a Decatur cul-de-sac.

Behind him, four tarnished tombstones carve holes in the horizon, their faces nearly swept clean by the wind, rain and time. The Barrackman family plot isn't the oldest site in the cemetery, but if the stories are to be believed, it's certainly one of the most active.

"Whether or not the Barrackmans have anything to do with the ghost that's supposed to sit here, I have no idea," Taylor says, sitting on the stairs.

The author of six books and a quarterly magazine dealing with the hauntings in the Midwest, Taylor would know better than most. As the area's premier research of the paranormal, Taylor's investigations have taken him from city libraries to country mansions, to the occasional cemetery.

"She's supposed to sit on the top step," Taylor says, patting the stone beneath him.

Below his fingers, letters spelling out the Barrackman family name are outlined in lichens.

"She just sits here and cries. She never makes a sound."

According to legend, the Barrackman ghost appears as the sun sets, head bowed, her semi-transparent form clothed in a long dress. When the sun slips below the horizon, she disappears.

"She's never been seen during the day and never after dark," Taylor said, "Only at sunset."

For those who categorize tales of the supernatural as pure myth, Lady Barrackman makes a romantic, if

melancholy story. For those who think there may be more to the spirit world than overactive imagination, Taylor offers another explanation.

"If indeed she does sit here, she could be a kind of residual effect of a woman who sat on these steps and cried, day after day after day," Taylor suggested. "Maybe she left an impression here."

Just as a young girl named Mary Bregavy evidently left her impressions on a Chicago suburb.

"Stories like Mary date all the way back to the time of the horse and carriage," Taylor noted.

This incarnation of the tale describes Bregavy as a girl who lived on Archer Avenue in Justice during the 1930s. According to legend, Bregavy was on her way home from a party at the O. Henry Ballroom (now the Willowbrook) when the car

in which she was a passenger jumped a curb.

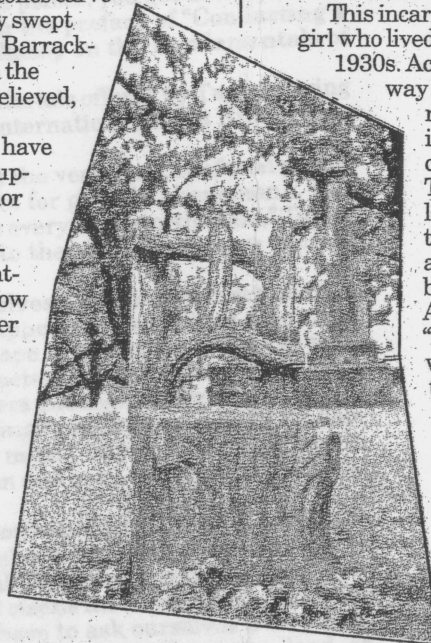
The driver lost control, smashing headlong into a support for Chicago's elevated train track. Bregavy was thrown from the automobile and died instantly. She was buried in Resurrection Cemetery off Archer Avenue, not far from her home.

"According to the story, people have seen a woman in a white dress hitchhiking on the side of Archer Avenue. What makes this story different from the typical urban legend is the number of people who have picked her up," Taylor said.

"Cab drivers will pick up this young girl and she'll say, 'I need to go down Archer.' So they'll take her down Archer. When she gets to the cemetery she disappears. All kinds of people have actually seen her on the road, picked her up, and had her vanish from the car."

Taylor said one of the most famous episodes involving Bregavy's ghost occurred in 1977, when a passing motorist spotted a young girl peering through the cemetery gate.

"He thinks she's trapped inside, so he goes to the



◀ **SHADOW CHASER:** Troy Taylor stands outside the Culver House in Decatur. The house is one of many in Illinois report to be haunted. Above: A number of legends revolve around "mourning chairs," stone seats placed at the grave site of a loved one by a relative who wanted to sit while visiting.

② Pemberton Hall Ghost packet, copy 2

Continued on C2

Hunter

Continued from C1

police," said Taylor. "They didn't find a woman, but when they got there, the bars on the gates had been pulled apart, and there were small hand prints in the iron. It's such a well-known story. I would say she's the most famous ghost in Chicago."

But all Illinois ghosts aren't confined to cemeteries.

A legend involving a haunted house near Greenville appeared in the Oct. 11, 1940, edition of *The Greenville Advocate*. John Nowlan, a journalist and local historian, recounted a bizarre story spun by Charles Smith, a native of the little town of Smith Grove. The incident involved a pain-ridden woman and a custom-made coffin.

Smith said in 1821 his grandparents bought a farm in the Smith Grove area of Bond County from the Leaverton family. Before the Leavertons owned the land, another family (whose name is lost to history) lived there. The family included a woman suffering from an unspecified ailment, possibly rheumatoid arthritis. Smith said the woman's body was so drawn she was incapable of lying down.

According to legend, pain twisted the woman's mind to the extent that she often threatened to return after her death to haunt those left behind. After her death morticians were unable to straighten her body. A custom-made coffin was built to fit the body, and the woman was buried sitting up.

Shortly after the burial, a land company bought the farm. The home was abandoned and left to wither in a thicket of trees. For years, passersby reported hearing mysterious noises coming from the abandoned home, until John Leaverton finally purchased the land, razed the old house and built his own home on the site. The source of the noises was never discovered.

Another story set in the same area revolves around a grave which may still exist in Smith Grove Cemetery. James Stubblefield (a once prominent name in the area) was buried near what was then the center of the cemetery.

Shortly after the funeral, stories of odd occurrences at the grave site began to circulate. Some reports had ghosts walking over Stubblefield's grave. Others identified lights hovering around the site.

Be it a clear and moonlit night or under a dark and starless sky, the reports always were the same, with the only exception coming on foggy nights, when the lights (or spirits) became more active.

Some searched for a rational explanation. Area residents suggested the roving lights were reflections from a nearby residence. But the original account notes that lights were often seen hovering over the grave when neighboring homes were dark.

Other accounts state that the lights moved even when the observers were standing very still, suggesting that their motion couldn't be attributed to a shifting point of view.

"I was courting my wife at that time," Smith told Nowlan during the original account. "One night, as we were driving near (the cemetery), she said she wished she could see it. I drove around where she could see the grave and, sure enough, there was the light."

Smith said his wife never wanted to see the grave again.

Reports of the mysterious lights continued for nearly two years after Stubblefield's funeral. Then, just as suddenly as they appeared, the lights vanished.

As have many of the ghosts which once haunted Illinois.

Although Taylor works to unearth new hauntings and keep the old lore alive, many of the stories which shaded our cemeteries and lingered over our abandoned buildings are forever lost.

So while some of us will wonder about the light burning in the old warehouse, or quicken our step in the dusky graveyard, or pause to make sure those are our footsteps echoing off an attic wall, most of us won't.

Yesterday's stories, like yesterday's spirits, draw their power from being remembered. In the absence of memory, legends die, and like forgotten ghosts are left to fade away.

Spirit Seekers

One of the most common questions posed to Troy Taylor when he presents himself as a paranormal investigator is: "Why?"

Taylor's interest began with newspaper reports of unusual phenomenon. He decided to see if there were more to the tales than eyewitness imagination and printer's ink.

"When you form a research society, or make it public that you're interested in investigating haunted places, you get a wide variety of telephone calls," Taylor notes in the preface of "Conducting a Paranormal Investigation: A Workshop on the Fundamentals of Hunting Ghosts."

The paper was one of several materials offered by Taylor during the first annual conference of the International Ghost Hunters Society in Decatur last August.

"Many are obvious hoaxes, or at the very least, confused people who are mistaking natural events for ghostly phenomena. But there are those few calls that make everything worthwhile," Taylor adds. "They're the ones that fit into the small percentage of cases that appear to be genuine."

Rather than outfitting themselves with arcane instruments, ghost hunters typically are equipped with standard recording equipment such as camcorders, tape recorders and cameras with high-speed film, along with some not-so-standard tools of the trade such as electromagnetic field meters and digital thermal scanners.

"One of the most important things you have to possess for success as a ghost hunter is an open mind," Taylor says "You have to be positive about the investigation and open to whatever phenomena that my occur."

As for other ghost hunters' motivation, Taylor says many are simply searching for proof that ghosts are real — "evidence that they're spirits of the dead who still roam this world," he says.

"If we take this into account, it means that we're accountable for the things we do in our life. We have to ask ourselves if we really want to try to repair any damage we've done after we're dead, or while we're still alive."

Preserving local haunts

Old ghosts may never die, but old buildings do. With the passing of their original owners, some of the most impressive, historically significant structures in Illinois have fallen into ruin.

Isolated cemeteries also are victims of abandonment, their markers often destroyed by neglect or vandalism. In recent years a number of restoration groups have worked to improve the condition of these sites. Not coincidentally, many paranormal investigators or "ghost hunters" also are avid historians and part-time preservationists.

A number of paranormal researchers have played active roles in campaigns to save these failing structures and forgotten cemeteries.

"If we're going to save these sites, we've got to use them," noted Jon Musgrave, a journalist and Southern Illinois historian.

Musgrave, along with other researchers, turned up enough information about Hickory Hill Plantation (also known as the Old Slave House) to arguably make it one of the most historically significant homes in Southern Illinois.

Musgrave passed the information along to Troy Taylor, who incorporated slivers of history into his own article about the house, which appeared in the spring 1997 issue of "Ghosts of the Prairie Magazine."

Taylor highlighted the need to preserve the home, characterizing it as "a fascinating historical museum" offering insight into a period of hidden history.

For more information on efforts to preserve Hickory Hill Plantation, contact Jon Musgrave at jonm@midamer.net, or PO Box 1142, Marion 62959.