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Circle City's spooks

We shed light on Indy's darkest local lore, tall tales and frightening sightings.

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Footsteps in the night, lights flickering on and off, floating orbs and transparent people.

Thought you'd outgrown ghost stories, huh? Once you find out how many reportedly haunted sites there are in Indy, places you've probably been at least a time or two, you might reconsider.

Paranormal activity isn't just for scary movies; some say it's a regular occurrence at many historic spots. And groups like the Indiana Ghost Trackers are using modern equipment, like digital cameras, audio recorders and electro-magnetic field detectors to find out if there's really anything going on at some of these spots.

According to Lorri Sankowsky, co-director of the Indianapolis chapter of the Indiana Ghost Trackers, Downtown Indy is "crawling with ghosts."

With all its Civil War and Underground Railroad ties, as well as its share of gang wars in the early part of the century, Indianapolis has had its fair share of death. And it seems many have yet to pass onto the other side, or they just like visiting some of their old stomping grounds.

BEGINNINGS

Nicole Kobrowski, who began Indiana Ghost Walks and Tours two years ago, became interested in the paranormal while growing up in a haunted house.

Her older sisters had both reported seeing a caped man with a bayonet, but the young Kobrowski figured it was just a prank to scare their little sister. But when she was about 11 or 12, she too saw the caped figure. And at a teenage sleepover some years later, one of Kobrowski's friends was so petrified after seeing the same figure in the room, that she refused to stay over at Kobrowski's house after that.



Dance into the fire: Model Tom Burnes portrays Jolly Werner, a drunk who was said to have fallen into a fireplace and died at the Athenaeum in Downtown Indianapolis. -- Illustration by Arnel Reynon and Michelle Pemberton / INTake

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SIGNS YOUR HOUSE COULD BE HAUNTED

Lorri Sankowki, co-director of the Indianapolis chapter of the Indiana Ghost Trackers, said the group offers free, confidential home and business investigations for people who believe they have ghosts. Here are a few things to look



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"She was speaking so rapidly in Spanish that I couldn't even understand her," Kobrowski said. "She was that scared."

But ghosts, in and of themselves, aren't usually bad. In fact, their mere presence is what usually frightens people, not anything that they are doing, Kobrowski said.

Think "Beetle Juice," not "Poltergeist." Well, not Betelgeuse himself, but Geena Davis' and Alec Baldwin's characters.

And the extent to which people are open to believing in or experiencing contact from the spiritual world is completely individualized.

"Like with anything, not just with ghosts, you can only see what you can handle," Kobrowski said. Some people sense a change in energy or feel the temperature change abruptly, while others will actually hear whispers, feel a tap on the shoulder or see orbs or actual transparent figures.

DO YOU BELIEVE?

We didn't actually experience any of that sort of thing on a recent Haunted Indianapolis tour with Kobrowski and husband Michael, but we did get a good sense of just how many ghosts may be floating around Downtown during the two-hour, 13-site walking tour.

"It's a fascination for people, and a lot of people just want to be scared," Kobrowski said of the type of people who come on her ghost walks. "The haunted tourism industry is really starting to pick up."

Kobrowski was inspired to start the business, now in its second year, after taking a ghost walk tour in South Carolina, wondering, "Why can't we do that in Indianapolis?"

With a passion for history and enduring interest in the paranormal, it seemed like the perfect fit. But Kobrowski said it took a couple of years to research the business side of the things, as well as the area's history.

"I'm always doing research," Kobrowski said. "It's an ongoing thing."

She's done historical research at libraries, through company contacts and local historians. Ghost stories, she said, come from first- and secondhand interviews, folklore and personal experience.

"I'm not here to change anybody," Kobrowski said. "This is for entertainment purposes only. You can believe or not believe whatever you want."

SPIRITED STORIES

Not that you're going to notice if the place is packed and you've had a few too many, but several local eateries around town have had lots of strange things happening.

I'm not going to give away the whole tour, but if you're up for a few ghost stories, here's how Kobrowski tells it.

RATHSKELLER

Circle City's spooks

for if you think your place has spirit visitors:

- Cold or hot spots that can't be explained
- Noises such as tapping, scratching, murmuring or rustling
- Missing items that turn up in unexpected places, such as keys, television remote controls, hats and gloves, and jewelry
- Electrical malfunctions in appliances and lighting
- Unexplained smells such as perfume, tobacco or something worse
- Unusual pet behavior, such as barking at an empty corner or a cat tracking movement when nothing is there
- The feeling of being watched by something

Different types of hauntings

Residual haunting: A playback of an event that lead to the death of an individual. It happens over and over on a regular basis. And some believe that it may not be limited to just the event that lead to death, but can include an event in the individual's lifetime, happy or sad, in which the ghost chooses to manifest itself.

Interactive: These include full and partial apparitions. Some are just noises without a body, or orbs, odors or mists may be present. Hot and cold spots are also indicators of spirits. And, of course, there's the all-out milky white, transparent or other colored apparition of a ghost in human form (as opposed to an orb, believed to be the true spirit form).

Demon or devil hauntings:

Some believe demons or devils disguise themselves as friendly human spirits and are most commonly associated with the Ouija board.

TOURS STILL AHEAD

401 E. Michigan St.

According to Kobrowski, The Rathskeller, or perhaps more accurately the Athenaeum, is "severely haunted."

Legend has it that a jovial character known as Jolly Verner used to spend quite a bit of time at the Rathskeller in his day. Unfortunately, Verner had too much to drink one night, fell into the fireplace and died.

Not many people at The Rathskeller had heard of Verner, but many had their own stories to tell.

I popped down before the Ghost Walk and one of the managers confirmed that he'd had his fair share of unexplainable incidents.

He said there have been times after closing when he'd turn off the lights and lock the upstairs rooms in the Athenaeum, only to return 15 minutes later and find the lights in the locked rooms back on.

And at a Christmas party one year, an employee's little girl ran crying to her parents, saying the man in the corner of the ballroom had scared her. But the adults never saw anyone.

Other employees have reported hearing footsteps, seeing things upstairs after everything is closed up for the night, objects moving by themselves and the alarm going off when no one is around to set it off.

More details about the Athenaeum on page 17.

ROCK BOTTOM BREWERY*10 W. Washington St.*

As the story goes, a bunch of firemen died in a blaze some years ago in the spot where Rock Bottom was built. Allegedly, these guys still like to hang out and have made quite a bit of noise on several occasions in the bar area after closing.

People have reported hearing murmurs and someone whispering something like, "Died fast."

Others have heard the water running while alone in the bathroom. (There's a theory that ghosts like playing with energy, especially water and electricity.)

One bartender reported chatting with a visitor who seemed to be particularly knowledgeable about the fire. When he turned to ask how the stranger knew so much about it, the man was gone.

SLIPPERY NOODLE*372 S. Meridian St.*

Of all the haunted places in Indianapolis, Ghost Tracker Sankowsky said the Slippery Noodle is at the top of her list.

Established in 1850, the Inn has gone through a few name and business changes, serving not only as a tavern before and after prohibition, but also as a bordello.

Gangsters were known to frequent the location in their

• **Oct. 23:** The Indiana Ghost Trackers will be leading haunted tours through one of Indy's most infamous haunted homes, the Historic Hannah House, from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. at 3801 Madison Ave. \$10 adults, \$5 children 6-12. www.indianaghosts.org

• **Oct. 28:** Chilling Chatham Arch-Lockerbie Tour at 8 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. Join Indiana Ghost Walks & Tours on a walk through the Theatre District, which holds the stories of Lady Bettina, Cockroach Row and Jolly Werner. \$10 per person, \$7 children under 11 and \$5 seniors. Reservations required. www.unseenpress.com

• **Oct. 29:** Haunted Underground Railroad Tour with Indiana Ghost Walks & Tours. Westfield is full of stories and folklore about people who helped slaves escape, as well as early century gangsters, at 8 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. \$10 per person, \$7 children under 11 and \$5 seniors. Reservations required. www.unseenpress.com

• **Oct. 30:** Indiana Ghost Trackers will lead the second annual "Ghost Tour: Ghosts and Infamous Places of Irvington" at 5 p.m., 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. Tickets are \$12.50 each, available at Lazy Daze coffee shop, where the tour will begin. For information, e-mail pr@irvingtoncouncil.com.

• **Oct. 31:** Scaredy Cat daytime tour of Haunted Indianapolis, 4 p.m. Chilling Chatham Arch-Lockerbie Tour, 8 p.m. Haunted Indianapolis tour, 9:30 p.m. \$10 per person, \$7 children under 11 and \$5 seniors. Reservations required. www.unseenpress.com

• **Nov. 1 and 2:** Celebrate the Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) festivities with a tour and dinner in a haunted

time, and a fight over one of the, um, ladies, left one man dead after the other stabbed him and left the bloody knife on the bar.

Wine bottles have been found open in the basement and certain rooms on the second floor, now mostly used for storage, have been known for unusual activity.

Apparently the "ladies" are still around, and after a lifetime of putting up with, well, what you'd expect at a bordello, it's rumored that they don't like when people come upstairs, especially not men. One employee reportedly hurried by one particularly creepy room during a shift at work, and saw the door open. When she walked back by, it was closed.

The next time she came by, a lady came out and reportedly stared at the employee with her black-pit eyes. She refused to go upstairs after that.

EMBASSY SUITES

110 W. Washington St.

The Embassy Suites is a far cry from the Bates Motel, but if you believe in the paranormal, keep your eyes and senses alert the next time you stay.

Cleaning staffs have experienced cold spots and spectral visitors in certain parts of the hotel, and one guest, who'd been in town for a convention, ended up leaving town early after an unnerving run-in.

The tale goes that she'd gotten into bed one night after the convention when the bathroom light flipped on. She got up and flipped it off. A second time, the light switched on and she went to flip it off but noticed the switch was firmly in the "off" position. The third time, she didn't bother getting out of bed but yelled, "knock it off" in frustration.

The next day, when she returned from her convention she found her suitcase sitting on her bed completely packed, but none of the cleaning staff or any other hotel employee said they'd done it or seen anyone do it.

Finally, this guest was in a public restroom alone when she heard the water turn on. When she emerged, a lady in old-fashioned clothing inquired, "Are you enjoying your stay?"

She murmured the polite response to the affirmative when the lady leaned in closer, looked her in the eye and said, "Are you sure?"

Needless to say, she took off quickly after that.

Apparently, the same block was once home to the the Claypool Hotel, where at least two murders occurred.

Kobrowski said one young woman, Dorothy Poole, was lured to the Claypool after graduation by the promise of a job, but ended up being stuffed in a dresser after being killed and possibly raped by the man who'd hired her.

A second woman, Naoma Riley, was a corporal on leave from Camp Atteberry in 1943 when she was found dead from cuts sustained from a broken whiskey bottle.

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restaurant. 6:30 p.m. in Westfield on Nov. 1, \$25. 7 p.m. in Indianapolis on Nov. 2, \$35. Reservations required. www.unseenpress.comTours still ahead

DEFINITIONS

- **Agent:** The person who is the focus or at the center of paranormal activity.
- **Akasha:** A mystical, spiritual substance where memories are stored since the beginning of time.
- **Astral plane:** A place where all thoughts, memories, fantasies and dreams of everyone in the world exist.
- **Astral projection:** The process where our etheric body, spirit or mind separates from the physical body while maintaining consciousness.
- **Banshees:** Most often associated with Ireland and Scotland, the Banshee is an omen spirit that forewarns people of an impending tragedy.
- **Black Dogs (Hell Hounds):** There have been countless reports over the world of these phantom canine-like creatures.
- **Channeling:** Describes the method in which mediums allow themselves to be used to manifest something that comes from outside.
- **Demons:** Said to have the ability to enter your home via the Ouija board.
- **Electro-Magnetic Field (EMF)** There is a theory that a high amount of electromagnetic energy can cause poltergeist activity, but also that these same high energy levels attract spirits and that it is the spirits themselves that cause strange phenomena.
- **Ectoplasm:** Said to be made up of a viscous substance that comes from a medium's solar

The story goes that Riley bought a fifth of whiskey and brought it to the hotel. While there, the front desk got a call from her room for soft drinks and ice. When the delivery boy brought the requested items, he found a mysterious woman dressed in black sitting on the bed. She told him to take a quarter from the dresser "for his trouble."

Later, there was another call for ice and the woman in black again told the delivery boy to "take a quarter for your trouble."

Meanwhile, a friend of Riley's called the room and got no answer. When the friend called back the next morning, a detective answered, and he hung up.

Apparently, when the maids came to deliver linens, they found Riley in her uniform, lying in a pool of blood, sliced around the neck and arms with a quarter next to her head.

SOLDIERS AND SAILORS MONUMENT

Monument Circle

German architect Bruno Schmitz designed this 284-foot limestone monument at the turn of the century, commemorating Indiana's soldiers and sailors who served in the Civil and Spanish American Wars.

Apparently, a newspaperman decided this was the perfect place to spend his last moments one day in 1931.

Sylvester Sammons, an editor at the *Morristown Sun*, called in sick, took an elevator to the top and dropped himself off the west side of the monument, landing right on the shoulders of peace (the woman holding the flag).

People say that since then, the male carving just below and to the right of the lady peace looks like he's crying and that he'd never been like that before.

Workers have heard footsteps, and the elevator has been known to shut on and off. And some people have reported feeling a hand on their back at the top observation deck, feeling like they were being pushed to the edge.

As Kobrowski says, "Sylvester may be up there trying to help people with their own problems as well."

HAWKINS HOTEL

Former site of Hawkins Hotel, Court Street at Talbott Street

In the 1920s and '30s, Indianapolis was said to have been overrun with crime and corruption, and Kobrowski said Court Street saw plenty of "robbery in the name of law" as Justices of the Peace made offenders pay boatloads of money for minor offenses.

Apparently, the nearby Hawkins Hotel was the place to go if you needed something shady. And one of America's first serial killers, H. H. Holmes, who "had a thing for murder," was rumored to have spent time at the hotel.

When the building was condemned and slated for demolition, with all the windows boarded up, a pair of men decided to see if there was anything valuable left inside. When they heard voices and footsteps, they split up to investigate, one starting at the top and the other at the bottom, meeting in the middle.

Finally, the pair ended up pointing flashlights at a larger-than-life-sized black figure hunched over in one of the rooms. Their beams seemed to bounce off the black figure, which turned toward them and had no face.

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plexus, a combination of certain chemicals used by a spirit to project solid images to its audience.

- **Exorcism:** The expulsion of a spirit, ghost or demon that possesses a person or place.

- **Malevolent:** A way to describe a malicious supernatural force that causes harmful acts to living beings.

- **Medium:** An individual who can communicate with spirits.

- **Orbs:** Allegedly the true spirit form.

- **Paranormal:** Something that is unable to be explained scientifically.

- **Poltergeist:** Activity connected with poltergeists and is that of unexplainable rappings and other noises.

- **Sensitive:** Someone who can sense a paranormal presence.

- **Zoofom phenomena:** A term used to describe entities that resemble animals but appear to be supernatural.

Source: Indiana Ghost Trackers Definitions

Legitimately freaked out by this point, the duo scrambled out of the room toward the window they'd entered through to find it closed and couldn't manage to budge it open.

They tried another and another, but couldn't open those either, until they finally smashed open a window and escaped.

OTHER LOCAL HAUNTS

Union Station

Though Indiana isn't thought of as one of the states that was heavily involved in the Civil War, Union soldiers were often laid over at Union Station on their way to or from battle. And some of the soldiers seem to check in once in awhile.

Security guards reported seeing a man in a soldier uniform walking down one of the walks late one night. Since one of the station's shops was an old-time picture place that had a Civil War uniform as one of the props, the guard chased the guy, thinking someone had broken in, gotten the costume and was playing a prank. But the soldier disappeared. Another guard saw a pair of soldiers later that night but retreated when he realized the grayish pair had no feet.

The Hannah House

A part of the Underground Railroad and the home of former State Legislator Alexander Hannah, this home is supposedly the site of a basement-full of deaths after a lantern tipped over and killed hiding slaves.

Also, Hannah's wife reportedly gave birth to a stillborn baby in one of the rooms, which has been said to be a hub for paranormal activity, including sweet aromas and the smell of rotting flesh, as well as the door swinging open after being locked.

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