

OUT OF THE
SHADOWS,
INTO THE
MAINSTREAM

**Ghost hunters
are busier than
ever in Eastern
Connecticut**

By Tom Soboleski



Most people fear even the thought of seeing a ghost. But a substantial and growing number of people actually seek ghosts out. They are paranormal investigators and ghost hunters — and they are busier than ever. They say the paranormal is plentiful around Eastern Connecticut. And it may not be as scary as you imagine.

...just a Poe boy...



Why is the interest in ghosts so high?

Shamus Denniston, director of the Thames Society of Paranormal Investigations (TSPI), thinks “the proliferation of paranormal shows has put things in the forefront.” Before that the public thought we were crazies, he says.

“I think we’ve brought it out of the shadows and made it more mainstream,” Denniston says.

Tom D’Agostino, a Putnam resident who has been researching and investigating reports of paranormal activity for 35 years, has a similar take.

“When the TV shows came out, all of a sudden it was something people wanted to do so everybody started forming ghost groups,” he says. “The only problem with that is that a lot of people don’t really know what they’re doing or getting into. It’s almost like it’s a fad.”

But Courtney McInvale Reardon, ghost hunter and founder of Seaside Shadows Haunted History Tours in Mystic, thinks there are rational explanations.

“Humans have always been attracted to the unknown. And there’s always an innate need to want the answer. The other thing,” Reardon says, “is that death is a part of life. It’s inevitable for every single one of us. So there’s always going to be that curiosity of what happens after death. Where do we go? What is next?”

While curiosity is strong, we like to minimize risk. Margee Kerr, a sociologist specializing in fear research at the University of Pittsburgh, said, “People often experience a kind of attraction/avoidance dynamic: we’re attracted to things that are frightening because we want to understand them, to make the unknown, known. Yet at the same time we don’t want to put ourselves in real danger. ‘Safe’ scary spaces allow us to get close



to what we're afraid of so we can explore and investigate and ultimately prepare ourselves to face the real threat, but from a safe distance."

Who are the ghosts?

Typically they are spirits of people associated with a location where they may have died violently or had some unresolved issue and they just don't want to leave, so they linger and make their presence known.

"They could be people who are just attached to the property," Reardon says. "They're going to be protective against everything that will be a threat to it."

If a negative entity entered, they're going to react to protect it just like we would with our homes, she says. In her experience researching ghosts, Reardon

says, "the ones that are out to harm are very rare. I would say less than 5 percent of paranormal activity comes from things that are really evil. Most of the time it's just generations before but their energy is still there."

Preston resident Corinne McDermott also believes in property attachment.

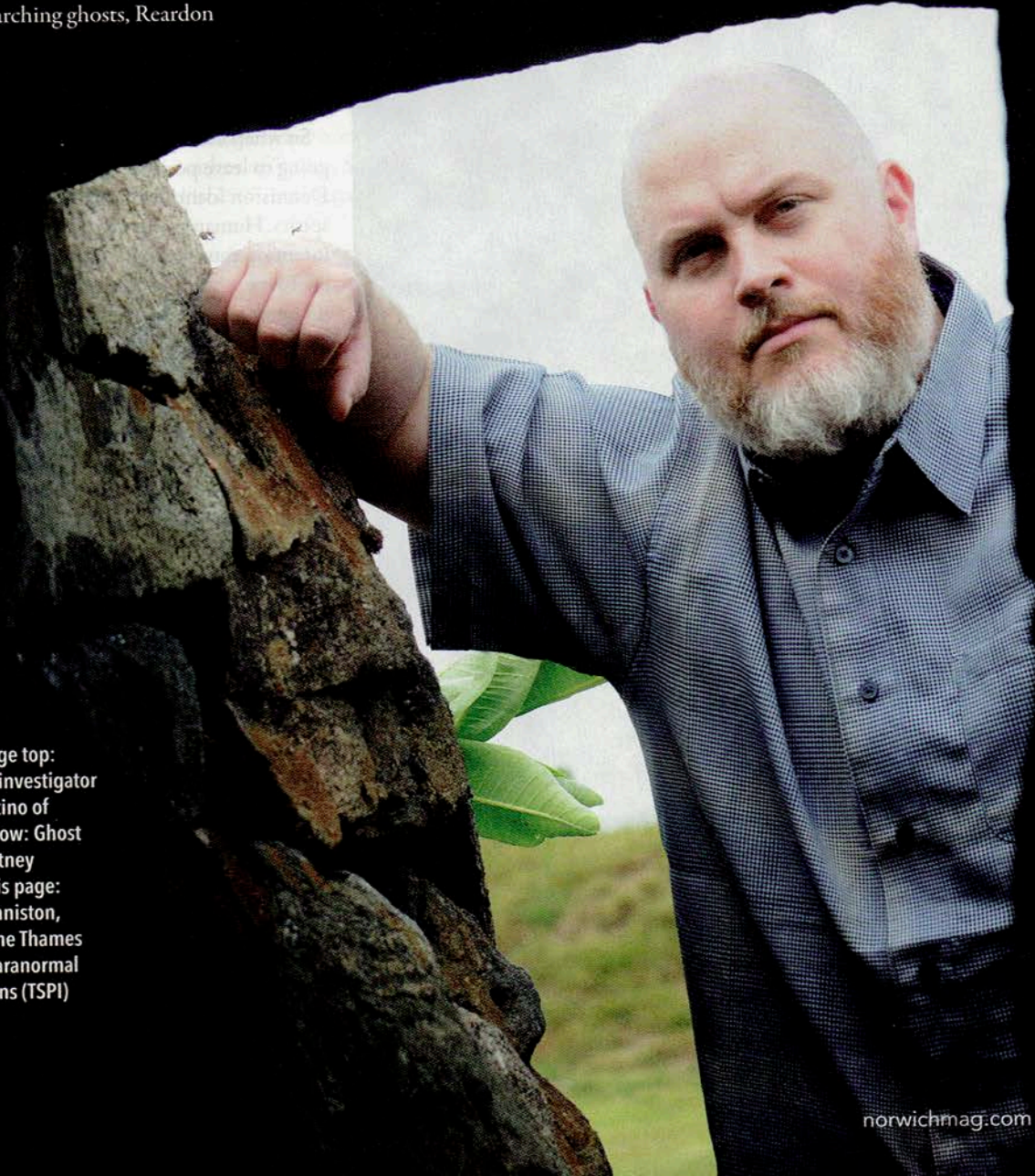
"I think a lot of old homes in this part of the country are bound to have some type of activity occurring in them," she says. "Back in the day, most people passed in their homes, so it's only fitting that their spiritual embodiments would linger in the home."

Our fascination fuels our curiosity.

"The majority of people believe that there is a world unseen, a spiritual plane perhaps coexisting with our physical

"IF GHOSTS
ARE
ENERGY,
WE'RE
ENERGY
ALSO"

Opposite page top:
Paranormal investigator
Tom D'Agostino of
Putnam. Below: Ghost
hunter Courtney
Reardon. This page:
Shamus Denniston,
director of the Thames
Society of Paranormal
Investigations (TSPI)





world,” says Laura Palmese, an investigator and researcher for TSPI. “These feelings however, do not constitute evidence. That being said, they are also not to be ignored. These perceptions originate from something — some stimulus we cannot easily interpret.”

A trained researcher can validate these feelings by providing evidence for them, Palmese writes on TSPI’s blog.

Friendly or evil ghosts?

Several ghost hunters we spoke to confirm that, for the most part, ghosts are innocuous and friendly, at least around our neck of the woods.

“Think of it like this,” D’Agostino says, “if ghosts are energy, we’re energy also. There are positive people and there are negative people. But the amount of positive people far outweigh the negative.”

So when most people die, he says, they’re going to leave positive energy behind. Similarly, Denniston identifies human spirits and negative spirits. Human spirits are typically benign, not intent on causing harm, he says.

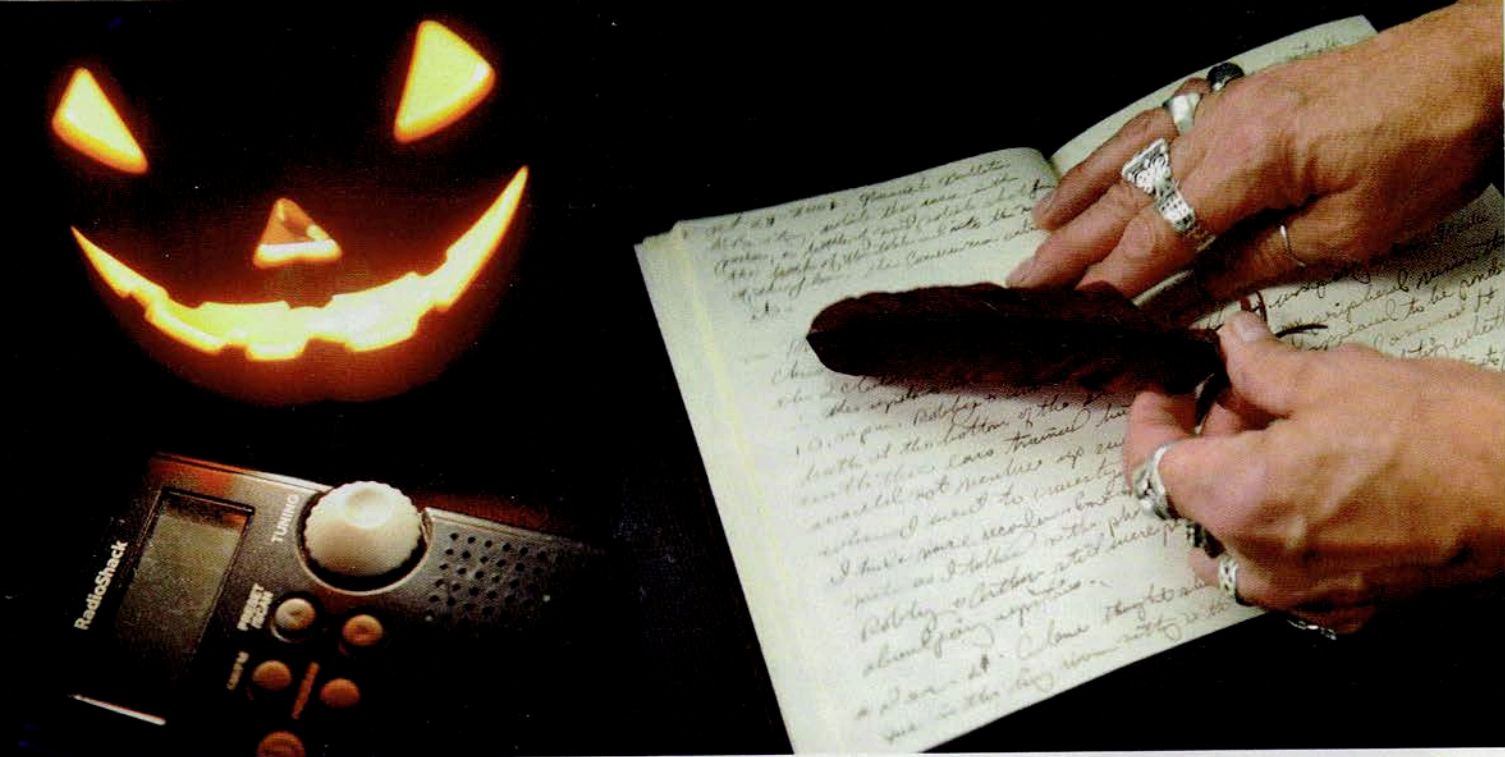
“To me a negative spirit is not a human spirit, it’s never walked the face of the Earth,” he says. “It’s an elemental-type creature, a demonic entity.”

Denniston says these spirits are rare and he has only encountered two cases with them.

Reardon mimics that theory, believing that spirits that are out to harm are not someone who has ever walked this Earth.

“I actually don’t think that anything that has been a person can be a truly evil spirit,” she says.

Evil spirits are sometimes referred to as “elementals, meaning a non-human entity.” They are basically energy that manifests itself as human-like and “they come into being through living people.” Reardon says living people can inadvertently conjure up evil spirits through rituals. “Perhaps they go to a cemetery or someplace and they’re trying to do their own occult ritual,” she explains. They want to see if they can conjure up the devil, she says. “They have an intent that isn’t good. They can actually create an energy based on their negative intent that becomes an ‘elemental’ that can be harmful.”



Why can some people see ghosts and others can't?

Donna Kent has more than 20 years experience hunting ghosts and paranormal phenomena. She's also the author of "Ghost Stories and Legends of Eastern Connecticut" published in 2007, and director of Haunted CT Tours.

"There's all kinds of spirits. I feel that for the most part it's a like-attract-like situation and it's almost always emotional, there's some emotional attachment," she says. "It could be a vulnerability. There's some sort of opening or doorway that this spirit can come in."

That's why, Denniston says, some people could live in a house for years and have no encounters, while another person does. "I think it depends on the spirit's ability to have energy to manifest itself in some way," he says.

We all have an aura (the concept of an energy field around every human), D'Agostino says. If you walk into a room full of people at a party, you get an instinctual reaction that makes you either want to know that person or not. That's coming from the aura they are giving off, he says.

"If you have a wide large aura, they (ghosts) may be attracted to it. That will be like a magnet," he says.

Having a high profile aura could explain why, even if you have never seen a ghost but you enter a space where ghosts reside, they will appear to you.

"When you hear about the extraordinary cases where people are saying 'I've never believed in ghosts before and all of a sudden I've seen this person in my home.' Those are high-energy ghosts," Denniston says. "They are manifesting in ways that are clear and concise and making themselves known. There's nuances to this, too. People who are sensitive may pick up on those nuances more than the average person."

Denniston succinctly reasons why D'Agostino's like-energy spirits and Kent's like-emotion spirits find each other. "I think our energy and our essence and our personality and our emotions — we carry that with us to the next life," he believes.

What about skeptics who say these apparitions could be natural atmospheric phenomena or refracted lights? What makes your findings credible?

"There's always going to be naysayers," Reardon says, "no matter what



Do you see it?

Nancy Atkinson, co-manager of Grill 37 in Pomfret, took the photo above earlier this year. Do you see the facial image on the kitchen wall?

credible evidence you capture.” She cites one skeptical woman on a tour who took a picture in a room. There were no people in the picture when she took it. Then “we looked at her camera, about 20 of us on the tour, and there was a shape of a person. It appeared in period dress.” Some people were amazed, but others remained skeptics, she says, thinking it was staged.

“There will always be someone who questions your findings,” says D’Agostino. To be reputable, he says, “would be the time and amount of investigations” you have done. “Being honest and truthful.” He also cites his credentials of studying physical sciences, esoteric sciences and “everything from meteorology to astronomy to psychology just so I could attack the idea from every single possible angle,” he says.

Donna Kent says she has dealt with many skeptics during her career and thinks they can have a positive impact on her research.

“The true meaning of a skeptic is someone who seeks the truth,” she believes. “I myself am very skeptical,” she says, especially when starting on a new case. A lot of sights and sounds that people think are ghosts in their homes can be explained by faulty furnaces or appliances, wiring or plumbing or light reflections. She makes sure to eliminate such possibilities first. She welcomes photography experts to examine her pictures. But healthy skeptics are challenging and lead her to produce better evidence, she says.

If somebody wants to go out exploring on their own, what advice do you have for them?

“First of all,” D’Agostino says, “read about where you’re going, the history, the knowledge. If it’s someplace outdoors, visit it during the day to see what it looks like,” before you go at night. Kent agrees, and adds, “You have to be wary of trespassing laws. Never go alone. And besides the thrill you may get,” she says, “just be aware of what could possibly happen. Nine times out of 10, nothing may happen. But there’s that 10th time.” She said the most important thing is to be prepared for the possibility of a spirit communication.

“If you don’t know what to do if some-

thing happens, then you could be in big trouble,” Kent says. “She also warns that if you go in too afraid, things could be attracted to your fear. But you shouldn’t ‘go in with too much bravado’ either. ‘You need to have a balanced approach,’ she advises.

But those cautions carry no guarantee. Kent describes her own harrowing experience in her book. She was researching the Old Trinity Church graveyard in Brooklyn about 10 years ago. As she stood in the back left corner by a stone wall, “Suddenly, invisible hands with an incredibly strong grip grabbed hold of both my wrists. These ‘hands’ twisted my arms back and forth while tightening their grip even more. Fingernails dug into the undersides of my wrists, leaving

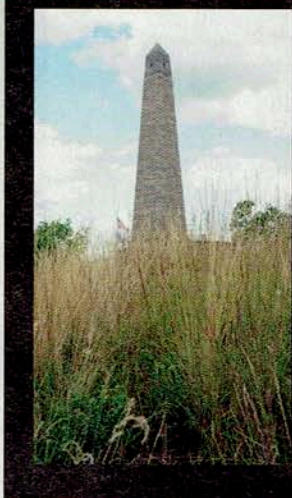
marks. I was literally jerked forward, my arms outstretched, towards the back of the graveyard. I experienced feelings of terror.”

Denniston says if you suddenly see a ghost, “the visceral reaction is you’re going to get scared. The times spirits have appeared to me face-to-face, it’s unsettling,” he says. “It’s obviously an extraordinary event and it’s going to surprise you and it’s natural to feel fear. But once you overcome that fear, I think it’s important to do a little self-reflection. It’s a fleeting moment. They’re not going to stick around.”

Where would someone have good odds to have a ghost encounter of their own?

D’Agostino named several locations that actively have ghost sightings:

Are you one of the believers?



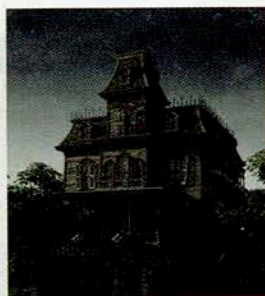
According to a 2017 New York Times article by Clay Routledge "roughly 30 percent of Americans report they have felt in contact with someone who has died. Nearly 20 percent believe they have been in the presence of a ghost. About one-third of Americans believe that ghosts exist and can interact with and harm humans; around two-thirds hold supernatural or paranormal beliefs of some kind, including beliefs in reincarnation, spiritual energy and psychic powers."



**"THE TIMES SPIRITS
HAVE APPEARED TO
ME FACE-TO-FACE,
IT'S UNSETTLING"**

"Captain Grant's Inn in Preston is haunted. They could stay there for the night," he suggests. He also includes Fort Griswold and the Avery-Copp House in Groton, Bradley Playhouse in Putnam, Grill 37 restaurant in Pomfret, and his own house. His old Victorian, he says, is full of ghosts and "everybody who's visited here and our neighbors have seen them."

At Captain Daniel Packer Inn in Mystic, participants on Courtney Reardon's tours will hear stories not just from the guides but "sometimes the chef will come out and share his stories," from the manager and even the diners. They all share incredible stories



**A Few
HAUNTED
HAPPENINGS**

AROUND THE STATE

Brooklyn

Spooky Nights, Oct. 20 and 21, Brooklyn Fairgrounds

Franklin

Ashbel-Woodward House in Franklin. Woodward was a Civil War doctor who was noted for treating tuberculosis. There will be a ghost hunt for the public there in October.

Mystic

Various tours of haunted buildings run regularly. Check www.seasideshadows.com

Norwich

October walking tours hosted by the Norwich Historical Society – includes stories of the Ancient Burial Ground, Benedict Arnold's mother's grave and other incidents from Norwich history.

Haunted History at the Leffingwell House Museum
Explorations of the building's haunts led by the Arrowhead Paranormal Team. Oct. 27, 6-11 p.m. \$30 adults and \$20 younger than 18. No one younger than 10 admitted.

Pomfret

Annual Halloween Bash at Grill 37 restaurant. DJ, costume prizes, Oct. 28, 6:30 p.m.

Putnam

"The Rocky Horror Show," cult classic stage production at Bradley Playhouse. Oct. 27 and 28 at 8 p.m. and Oct. 28 at midnight.

Windham

Witchcraft in History and Fable
Witchcraft history, dioramas of witches from history and literature from around the world, Oct. 7 through Nov. 19 on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at the Windham Textile Museum. Visit www.millmuseum.org

Spirits of Downtown
Stroll through downtown and hear chilling tales of ghosts and haunts, led by historian Bev York, Oct. 27, 6 p.m. from Jillson Square

"and people are really taken in," Reardon says. But location is no sure thing. "I don't really think it matters," Denniston says. "I believe they can be anywhere. A lot of people like to go for the spooky factor and go to cemeteries. I tend not to have a lot of luck at cemeteries." He says some investigators

may be open to letting a novice tag along on a case if you are serious and sincere.

Kent says the level of spiritual and paranormal activity has increased in 2017. She is not sure why and isn't sure what to make of it. That is sure to whet some appetites —while scaring off others.

Where are the ghosts? Right here in Northeast Connecticut

Northeastern Connecticut bills itself as the Quiet Corner, but ghosts are lurking in its dark corners, according to numerous eyewitness accounts. The spirits, they insist, are right here in our midst — in restaurants, in theaters, in museums, in inns, not to mention cemeteries. Some sightings are frightful while some are benign, letting us know we may not be alone even when we think we are. Here are some firsthand accounts from the region.



COVENTRY

At the **Nathan Hale Homestead**, where Connecticut's state hero was born, "they're having paranormal things happen to them pretty regularly," says Courtney McInvale Reardon, who is a docent and a ghost researcher. Things just move on their own or are found out of place, she says. People find things in rooms that weren't there before. The encounters are not limited to staff members. One woman on a recent tour told Reardon she saw a chair in Nathan's father's room move and "they heard this big booming sound. Everybody yelled and got kind of nervous." This is presumably the ghost of Nathan's father, Richard Hale, she says. He built the house and resided there the longest. "We think his son, Nathan's brother John, is there as well."

POMFRET

At **The Grill 37** restaurant on Route 44 (formerly Harvest Restaurant), there are current reports of numerous unexplainable activities. Dating from 1765, the building was a private residence until the 1990s, when it was turned into a restaurant. Ghost stories go back many years.

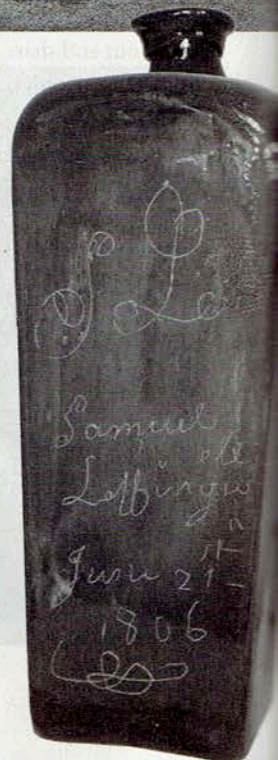
Today's owner, Ian Farquhar, took over four years ago. Shortly after, he asked some friends for help to get the stereo system working. So they went into town to get supplies. "When we left there was nobody here," he says. "We set the alarm, turned off all the lights. When we came back and entered the front lobby, the radio was on and cranked."

Farquhar and co-manager Nancy Atkinson claim there are three ghosts residing in the restaurant. Atkinson says there



NORWICH

Alexis Phillips, a docent at the **Leffingwell House & Museum**, says she frequently sees and interacts with ghosts in the house. She identifies a little girl named Hannah, whom she claims moves things. "I gave her pencils to draw on a piece of paper and the pencils have been moved around the house and there's pencil marks on the paper," Phillips says. Hannah was 8 when she died of childhood disease prevalent in the 1700s. She was the last child to be raised in the house. Alexis says she often has people on her tours tell her that "somebody is pulling on my sleeve. Or somebody touched my shoulder."



were three children of the original owners from the 1700s, the Grosvenor family, who died while they lived there; "one is 19, one is 8 and the other one is 2." Atkinson described an incident a few months ago of a man who was in the men's room by himself. When he came out, he asked her if something was wrong with the plumbing.

"I said no. And he said both water faucets turned on at the same time by themselves," and the paper towel dispenser began rolling. "We have multiple guests tell us that their drink moved across the table," Farquhar says. Atkinson says she's been told of spinning drinks

These are just a few incidents, they related. They describe Grill 37's ghosts as friendly, but if they get too annoying, they tell them to knock it off, and things seem to calm down for a while.



PRESTON

At **Captain Grant's Inn**, ghost encounters "happen pretty much on a regular basis," says owner Carol Matsumoto. A common occurrence is "people report the handles on their doors start to jiggle. One person opened the door while it was jiggling, but nobody was there. Hearing a little girl giggle in the hallway and marbles rolling on hardwood is another common occurrence."

Matsumoto claims she has identified seven ghosts inhabiting the inn and that they are friendly and do no harm. "All of our ghosts are benign," she says. "Friendly helpful ghosts and evil ghosts don't cohabit the same place." In 22 years, she says they've had 35,000 guests "and we haven't had more than five that have left because they were scared."

PUTNAM

If you want the real Phantom of the Opera, you might find it here at the Bradley Playhouse. Greg Brock, a co-director, set designer and sometime actor, has been with the Playhouse since 1989. He describes the time a few years ago he was on a ladder painting the trim on new windows. "It was night and I was here alone. Suddenly it sounded like somebody was walking up the ladder," he says. "All the hairs on my arm stood up. At that moment I said to myself, 'This can wait for another day.' I left the ladder there and I took off for the night."

Another time he was in the dressing room waiting to go onstage. "I was in a show," Brock says. "I was sitting on the arm of this chair and a woman in the show was sitting in the chair. And we're just talking. And I get a hand on my thigh. I turned to the woman and said, 'Did you put your hand on my thigh?' And she's like 'what are you talking about, Greg?' And I went, oh, OK. And I told her that I just felt a very distinct handprint on my leg. Which then made all the hairs on my head and my arms rise up."

Other cast members have reported seeing ghosts in the balcony during rehearsals, and some audience members claim that seats next to them have gone up or down by themselves.

WINDHAM

The **American Thread Co.** once made specialty threads for the spacesuits that landed on the moon and for boots in the Pacific theater during World War II. Today its former store is the Windham Textile Museum, and its programs director, Bev York, says there are things that happen in the building that can't be explained.

York says she'll be looking for important papers in the office that she knows are there but seem to be misplaced and can't be found. "It's something I have to find and it's late at night and I can't find it. Sometimes I would go home in tears because I'm so stressed out about it. The next day, it's on top of the pile. I can't explain that and that happened to me four times."

She believes something or someone in the building was trying to help her out.

Another incident involved the door to the electrical equipment closet. The door has barrel locks on the bottom and the top. "I never do the locks. I just close the door but never really lock it." She says one day when she went to shut off the lights and go home, the door was locked. "I have never locked that door. So I can't explain it."

