

Western Kentucky University

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Ghosts of Western Kentucky University

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Ghosts of Western Kentucky University
by Lynn Niedermeier

Introduction

Like many universities, WKU boasts tales of accidents, suicides and other tragedies that have given rise to campus hauntings. Stories abound of dearly departed students, staff, residence hall assistants, and even construction workers and Civil War soldiers who haunt the Hill with the sights and sounds of their spectral wanderings. Passed along by word of mouth to explain unusual occurrences, memorialize the dead, or offer cautionary tales to young people living away from home, WKU ghost stories have become associated with particular campus buildings but, it's safe to say, have content and themes that are recognizable by college students everywhere.

What follows are some WKU ghost stories collected from the materials listed in the bibliography at the end of this paper. Don't be surprised, however, if you have heard the stories differently, for the details can be as hazy and mutable as ghosts themselves.

Are these stories true? That's not the issue. Whether you believe them or not they are, in the words of Lynwood Montell, WKU emeritus professor of folk studies, "told to be true."

"The body was never discovered": Pearce-Ford Tower

By the time the tallest residence hall – in fact, the tallest building – on WKU's campus opened in fall 1970, it was already rumored to be inhabited by a visitor from the beyond: a worker who fell down the elevator shaft from the topmost floor during construction, and whose body remains entombed somewhere in the foundations of the structure. When Pearce-Ford is closed between semesters, the elevators will run by themselves, their doors opening and closing without anyone present – except, perhaps that ghostly worker for whom their safe installation came too late.

Once in place, however, these same elevators can still malfunction – with disastrous results, as one of Pearce-Ford's early residents learned. He was in the habit of going up or down to other floors to use the shower. Emerging towel-clad from the bathroom one day, he pushed the button for the elevator, stepped through the doors – and hurtled twenty stories to his death. Each year, on the anniversary of the tragedy, ghostly wet footprints appear as his spirit retraces its final walk.

In the fall of 1994, real tragedy struck Pearce-Ford when a construction worker was crushed to death in the building's mechanical room during the moving of a 7,000-pound heating and cooling unit. Since that time, when the air conditioning system rattles or malfunctions, the ghost of the worker is said to be reminding residents of this unfortunate event.

“We found wet footprints”: Barnes-Campbell Hall

Opened in fall 1966 for 392 students, Barnes-Campbell has at least two things in common with some of WKU’s other residence halls: it was named for two regents, in this case Sheridan C. Barnes and Donald A. Campbell . . . and it has those quirky elevators. When they stop working, these contraptions have a way of tempting students and resident assistants to try a quick repair. Unfortunately, such amateur maintenance also has a way of dispatching its practitioners to the hereafter.

It happened in Barnes-Campbell Hall during spring break, about 1968. One of the hall’s resident assistants had just finished taking a shower. Trotting along the fifth-floor hall in his bare feet, he noticed the stuck elevator. He had been warned against correcting the problem on his own, but not to worry, he had done it before. Just find the elevator key, pry open the door, lean into the shaft, flip a switch and presto! No more long walks up the stairs for him or his fellow residents. This time, however, it didn’t work. Maybe it was his slippery, wet feet, but some say his effort ended in a plunge down the elevator shaft to his death. Others say he actually got the elevator working again, only to be crushed as it descended before he could get out of the way.

Today, the ghost of the unfortunate RA not only revisits the scene of his last duty, but has been held responsible for other strange occurrences in the hall. One year during spring break, two RAs returned from dinner to discover all the fifth-floor water faucets turned on. Residents have reported seeing the elevator doors open on the fifth floor late at night, but have wondered how the stop was made with no one inside to press the button. The most chilling evidence of the ghostly RA, however, is a trail of wet footprints leading from the showers to the elevator, and sometimes to a vacant, locked room. Spring break is the best time to watch for these footprints, as the doomed RA reenacts his fatal mission.

“There are ‘attachments’ here”: the Kentucky Building

War letters from GIs to their sweethearts. Family Bibles, with generations of births and deaths carefully inscribed. Children’s toys. Nineteenth-century quilts. Photographs. Diaries. Clothing. Jewelry. Furniture. All these and more can be found in WKU’s Kentucky Library & Museum, which for sixty years has preserved historical materials relating to Kentucky and Kentuckians. Do the spirits of the long-dead owners of these artifacts hover nearby, still attached to the books, papers, clothing and amusements they loved during their lifetimes?

Perhaps. Staff in the Kentucky Building have reported a feeling of “being watched” as they go about their duties. A weekend curator reported that she once glimpsed a dark-haired man dressed in old-fashioned mourning clothes. A later photograph of her taken in the building showed that this gentleman may have assumed another form, a mysterious white haze visible over her right shoulder. A student worker has felt rushes of cold air and heard unidentifiable noises in the building. Books in storage areas have been found inexplicably left open, as if a spirit had been reading about the life and times it once knew. During a visit to the Kentucky Building, a psychic once explained that the artifacts it houses can carry an “attachment” or

imprint of the life of a particular person. The energy given off by these attachments can be detected by inhabitants of the living world in numerous ways – vaguely uncomfortable feelings, strange noises, cold air streams, even actual apparitions. The psychic picked up the presence of a female spirit in a stairwell and an entire group of people, including a child, in a storeroom. These presences aren't negative, she pointed out, just curious – wondering, perhaps, how this place came to possess their diaries, letters, business papers, favorite rocking chair, cigar case, and cherished family photographs.

“I’m scared to stay here:” the Lambda Chi Alpha House

The Tudor-style house at 1504 Chestnut Street is home to the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity and, it is said, the spirit of a woman who was murdered in the house many years ago and cannot or will not leave. Someone once saw her ghost running across the front lawn. A resident came downstairs early one morning to find that she had lit a fire in the fireplace. She activates an alarm clock at midnight whenever a resident sleeps in a certain room for the first time. She turns lights on and off and moves the brothers' personal belongings when they are asleep.

One well known incident suggests that the ghost has literary aspirations. A brother awoke one night to the sound of a strange noise. Investigating, he traced the sound to one of the rooms, but it was locked from the outside. A light glowed under the door, however, and from within the brother could hear the clicking of typewriter keys. Like so many restless souls who met their end too early, this spirit seems to intend no harm, but her activities have made some of the Lambda Chis nervous about staying in the house without lots of their brothers for company.

“She does inhabit the hall”: McLean Hall

Mattie McLean came to Bowling Green from Mississippi in 1902 and enrolled at the Bowling Green Business College. After graduation, she accepted a position at WKU as President Henry Hardin Cherry's private secretary – a position that, one observer noted, required the diplomacy of Talleyrand, the firmness of Stonewall Jackson, and the patience of Job. It didn't hurt to be a good stenographer, either.

But “Miss Mattie,” as she came to be known, was equal to the task. Students soon came to realize that she was the power behind the throne, helping them with everything from employment to landlord problems as she directed President Cherry's never-ending stream of visitors and correspondence. One student recalled that she “absorbed more shocks and soothed more ruffled souls than we will ever know.” Another said that when a student reached the end of his rope, she showed him how to stretch the rope.

When Miss Mattie retired in 1945, she left generations of students with memories of her efficiency and loyalty – but when she died in 1954, she appeared to leave something else behind. Although she used to live in Potter Hall, some say that her spirit remains on campus, residing in – where else? – McLean Hall, a residence hall opened in 1949 and named in her honor. Before McLean Hall went co-ed, the women who lived there sensed Miss Mattie's

presence. “She thinks of us as her girls,” insisted one. They could hear her strolling the halls, checking up on things, looking out for them. Communications with Miss Mattie, via Ouija board, found her a friendly, motherly type, but sometimes she liked to play tricks on her girls and even appeared to them from time to time upon request. So far, no one has deployed the Ouija board to find out what Miss Mattie thinks about the current co-educational status of her hall. Perhaps she is handling the change with her usual efficiency. But chances are, she’s still watching out for her girls.

“No one was supposed to know about it:” Potter Hall

WKU’s first residence hall, Potter Hall (named for WKU regent J. Whitfield Potter) was built for 250 students in 1921. It has served as both a women’s and men’s residence hall, and also housed the college cafeteria before being converted into an administration building in 1994.

Although Potter saw many generations of students pass happily through its doors, for one the college experience became an eternal treadmill. This unhappy spirit would walk the floors of Potter Hall, push aside furniture, make strange noises, and call residents’ names. Night clerks heard keys turning in locks and the sound of change being inserted into a vending machine – they even heard the clunk as the soda can fell – but saw no one. Like the proverbial whistler in the graveyard, staff would pass by one of Potter’s basement storage rooms quickly and reluctantly, and never at night. Trying to make sense of the mystery, curious residents used a Ouija board to contact the spirit, who responded with alacrity but also with sorrow and bitterness. Her name, it is said, was Allison. Some years ago, she had committed suicide by hanging herself in that basement room that everyone seemed to avoid. She gave precise details of her death – the date, even the location of the room where it happened. When the residents asked a housekeeper about the incident, she was surprised by what they already knew, as the tragedy had been carefully hushed up over the years.

Since Potter Hall’s conversion into an administration building, Allison has been heard from less frequently, but a 1994 incident in which she loudly banged on a pipe in the room where she died suggests that her tortured soul may still be wandering.

“She jumped from the ninth floor”: Rodes-Harlin Hall

Named for former WKU regents John B. Rodes and Max B. Harlin, Rodes-Harlin Hall opened to 400 women students in fall 1966. When the residence hall was officially dedicated a year later, the dedication program boasted of its spacious lobby and reception area and its general beauty and functionality. Rodes-Harlin, however, has had its problems over the years, including infestations of mice and, in 2000, more elevator breakdowns than any other building on campus.

But there is said to be a dark day in the hall’s history which has given rise to a haunting. Like Potter Hall, the tragedy of suicide visited Rodes-Harlin when a distraught female student ended her life by jumping from the building’s top floor. Afterward, the girl’s roommate would hear

tapping on her door, but when she opened it no one was there. Even now, the ghost of the dead young woman is said to appear each year on the day of the suicide. Girls living on the ninth floor can also hear the sound of her footsteps on the roof at the very spot from which she leaped to her death.

“The ax flashed”: Schneider Hall

Built in 1928 as West Hall, this residence hall was renamed White Stone Hall, then Florence Schneider Hall in honor of a former WKU registrar and bursar. Over its life, the stately Georgian Revival building has been home to the college infirmary as well as to Army Air Corps cadets who trained here during World War II; today it houses the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science in Kentucky. Its white limestone facade, however, is also said to hide a singularly bloody and maniacal deed.

It happened 40, perhaps 50 years ago. WKU was on spring break and the campus was quiet, but two girls had stayed behind in the hall to catch up on some schoolwork. One of them – we’ll call her Judy – was in the wrong place at the wrong time. As she worked quietly at her desk one night, a killer – some say an escaped mental patient on a deranged mission – entered her room through a window. Raising the ax he clutched in his hand, he brought it down savagely upon Judy’s head, then fled. Mortally wounded, Judy managed to crawl down the hall to the room of the building’s only other occupant. Weak and bleeding, she scratched on the door for help while her friend huddled inside, too terrified to answer. When she finally peered out the next morning, there was Judy’s body, an ax embedded in the skull. Some say there was no body, only a pool of blood and the crimson stains of her fingerprints streaked across the door.

But Judy lives. She revisits the scene of her murder every spring break, although residents have also sworn to hearing her at other times of the year. She sits in windows, moves furniture, turns alarm clocks and computers on and off and still scratches futilely on doors, eternally trying to escape her killer.

“We were all sitting there kind of freaked out”: the Sigma Alpha Epsilon House

In 1861 and 1862, both Union and Confederate troops could be found in or near Bowling Green. Like so many soldiers who served in the Civil War, they were more likely to fall victim to diseases – typhoid, dysentery, measles and malaria, to name a few – than to battle wounds. Consequently, wherever the men encamped, it was necessary for their officers to commandeer churches and houses for use as hospitals. But these hospitals were hardly the antiseptic environments we know today. They were grim charnel-houses, home to primitive medical procedures and unspeakable filth, where young men ended their lives in pain and fever, wishing that their time on earth had been longer.

One such hospital, it is said, was a home at 1410 College Street that served as the Sigma Alpha Epsilon house. The fraternity brothers there were said to share the house with the ghost of one

of the Civil War's departed soldiers, a tall, slender man in military cap and overcoat who had identified himself (via Ouija board) as "Kevin." They saw him in mirrors and walking in translucent silhouette. More often, they heard him treading over floors, opening doors, and turning on appliances. As a group of brothers watched nervously one night during finals week, he even activated their telephone answering machine several times, then caused the phone to ring but declined to speak at the other end. Kevin's favorite number was said to be 7, and his presence was sensed in the room bearing that number. But one brother had also heard the locked door of room number 4 open to admit the ghostly visitor. Kevin seemed forever to be making his rounds, wandering mournfully over the creaky floorboards where he and so many of his brothers lost their battle with death.

On April 7, 2005, fire destroyed the Sigma Alpha Epsilon House. Luckily, no one was hurt, but the question remains: has Kevin accompanied the brothers to their new home on 14th Street?

"When I first saw it, I couldn't move": Van Meter Hall

Before being named Van Meter Hall, the edifice that crowns the Hill was known simply as the Administration Building. Inside is Van Meter Auditorium, the site of countless lectures, concerts, plays and commencement ceremonies as well as regular chapel exercises in which WKU's first president, Henry Hardin Cherry, would deliver inspiring orations.

Construction on this Classical Revival structure, named for WKU benefactor and Chancellor Captain Charles J. Van Meter, commenced in 1909, with a skylight planned above the stage of the 2,000-seat auditorium. One day, a workman who was perched on the skylight looked up from his labors and spotted an airplane. What a novel, and perhaps frightening sight this must have been in early 20th-century Bowling Green! Out of fascination – or perhaps surprise – the unfortunate man became disoriented, lost his balance, plummeted to the half-built stage, and died. His broken body left a large bloodstain which, to this day, will appear as a ghostly red glow during events in the auditorium. Attempts to clean or replace the stage flooring have proven futile, as the stain soaks through and reappears.

Some say this tragedy actually occurred in the 1940s, when the skylight was being covered over. But between these two dates we know of an actual death-by-skylight, an accident that occurred on September 2, 1918. An army aviator was heading for Bowling Green to give a demonstration at the county fair, and a young man named Henry Clegg had joined other students clustered on the roof of Van Meter Hall to witness his arrival. On word of the plane's approach, Clegg rushed for an ideal view, but fell through the skylight and died a short time later in hospital.

Other variations of the story identify the ghost of Van Meter as a young actress who committed suicide, a hermit who once lived in a cave beneath the stage, or Henry Hardin Cherry himself. Whoever he or she once was, the ghost has regularly made its presence known to horror-stricken students. "It stood motionless, staring at me," recalled one. "Its face contained no emotion or expression, yet its blank stare penetrated me. Its body seemed to be engulfed in a strange blue light." Other witnesses have described a man in his 50s, or just a mysterious figure

in white. The ghost is sometimes content just to make mischief – turning on lights, knocking over music stands, opening and closing curtains and moving furniture. Staff of the Office of University Relations, which moved into Van Meter Hall in 1997, arrived at work one morning to find a large table inexplicably moved to the opposite end of the lobby. They have also experienced strange computer glitches, which suggest that the ghost has a fascination with technology. With so many manifestations to choose from, who can doubt those who say that they have “never felt alone” in Van Meter Hall?

Bibliography

More information about WKU ghosts is available in the Manuscripts & Folklife Archives section of the Kentucky Library & Museum, and in WKU’s University Archives.

Here’s a sampling:

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