Haunted History

by Susan S.
As frightening as the IRS, more hair-raising than your first invitation to join AARP, even scarier (almost) than current prices at the gas pumps, are the many ghoulish stories told and retold during the Halloween season each year. For more than a century Kansans have joined in the autumn fun of pulling pranks, dressing in silly or creepy costumes, and feeling our hearts race and our throats clutch at oft-told ghost stories. Many of us remember the first time we heard such tales as “The Man with the Golden Arm” or “The Tell-Tale Heart,” or how weak our knees felt as we carried our trick-or-treat bags along familiar streets on Halloween night, when the wind blew through the tall, dark evergreens on

Gruesome ghouls and grisly ghosts, Wretched souls and cursed hosts. Vampires bite and villains creep, Demons scream and shadows sleep. Blood runs cold in every man, Fog rolls in and coffins slam. Mortals quake and full moon rise,
Fear—done safely—is all part of the good fun of being young. This year, as shorter days and cooler nights come upon us, the Kansas State Historical Society has turned its thoughts to a delightfully scary exhibit entitled Haunted History, which runs through Halloween. It’s filled with all the strange and frightful historical items we’ve collected over the years, including masks and costumes, butchers’ saws and a crib crypt, a mortician’s embalming machine and table, surgical kits and bloodletting tools, Dracula and vampire paraphernalia, and even a Ouija board, which must never ever be burned; if it is, it will scream, and anyone hearing the scream will then have only thirty-six hours to live!

But of course you’ll need some preparation for this exhibit, and what better way to tap into terror than to uncover some of our state’s own unexplained stories? Kansas has plenty of them. In 1997 author Lisa Heffner Heitz gathered her favorites in a collection she entitled Haunted Kansas: Ghost Stories and Other Eerie Tales. With thanks to her for pulling these spine-tinglers together into one place, let’s take a look at the side of Kansas history that resides in the Twilight Zone.

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How do you know, when someone is dressed up on Halloween, whether it’s a costume or the real thing? A number of trick-or-treaters at Fort Leavenworth in years past couldn’t tell the difference. They’ve reported that, in their travels from house to house, they’ve been stopped by a young woman in frontier dress who is obviously distressed and looking for something. She lifts her old-fashioned oil lantern and searches the faces of the children. “Ethan? Mary?” she asks them as she gathers her shawl around herself. But when she realizes that these are not her children, her face falls in disappointment, and she turns and moves on, still calling for her youngsters as she fades into the distant darkness.

This woman, say locals, is Catherine Sutler, a frontier mother who came to Fort Leaven-
worth with her husband, Hiram, in 1880 to visit relatives. The Sutlers possibly were on their way to the West Coast to settle in Oregon and planned to stay along the Missouri River for only a short time. The family set up camp, and the parents, providing sufficient warning to stay away from steep bluffs and the rapidly flowing river, sent their children to collect wood for the fire. Time passed, and realizing the children should have returned, the parents set out to find them. But Ethan and Mary seemed to have disappeared. Soon residents of the fort joined the search, looking late into the evenings with their oil lamps, calling to the children, and hunting along the banks of the river. The town called off the search after three days, but the distraught parents continued to look for their children, postponing their plans to move west. Days turned into weeks and then to months, and by winter Hiram had given up hope. Catherine, however, had now become a familiar figure in town, calling for her children as she searched with her lamp well past dark through the snow and bitter cold. The elements soon took their toll on her. The heartbroken mother contracted pneumonia and died. Hiram, widowed, took up residence at the fort, then packed up the rest of his belongings and returned to Indiana. With this resolution

This story, surprisingly, had a fairly happy ending. In the spring, when a group of Fox Indians passing through the area brought with them Ethan and Mary Sutler. The children had indeed ignored the warnings about the river the previous autumn and had attempted to gather driftwood along the banks. They fell in and were carried downstream, where the tribe members had found them and cared for them until the Indians returned to the Fort Leavenworth vicinity. Hiram received word that the children were alive, and the family was reunited.

Catherine’s spirit, however, never learned that the children were safe. She continues to search for them to this day, and according to Heitz, “She has been seen floating over the golf course and walking through the National Cemetery, her lantern light dipping behind the tombstones” as she searches and calls out “Ethan? Mary?”

Residents of Valley Center, north of Wichita, show little surprise when folks report to them the sound of a baby crying, late at night, by the 109th Street Bridge over Jester Creek. This sound, along with other mournful noises,
The Unfortunate Bride

A unidentifiable white shapes floating around the vicinity, sudden rushes of cold air over the river, or stalling car engines on the bridge, even rainclouds that refuse to dampen the bridge’s planks, all of these incidents can be responded to with a knowing nod and the name “Theorosa.”

Time has offered up several different stories regarding the eerie occurrences in this location, but a few facts seem to remain constant. At one time a woman named Theorosa (a white woman with a baby, or possibly a Native American woman with an illegitimate white baby) had cause to drown her child in the waters of Jester Creek. Some say she performed the dastardly deed out of guilt or shame; others say she possibly was a victim herself. But whatever the reason, she also lost her own life in the rushing waters, and to this day her spirit haunts the bridge and its surrounding area. She is known to students today, even though the bridge, once a site of intense “partying” by teenagers, burned in 1974 and again in 1976 after it had been rebuilt. Folks driving in the area claim to have heard the moaning or seen the strange lights and wispy white figures floating above the water around the banks and in the adjacent fields, running, scratching, wailing, and weeping. Lean over the bridge and call to Theorosa, claim to be her baby, and wait to see if she rises.

Do you dare?

According to Lisa Hefner Heitz, Atchison holds the distinction of being the most haunted town in Kansas. One residence on Seventh Street is home to one of the town’s many ghosts, although this spirit does not peer out of windows, float through doorways, moan or whisper, or play with locked doors. Instead its activity is confined to an unusually large wooden antique trunk with a secured metal latch, purchased at a yard sale from a residence in Kansas City and used to decorate a spare bedroom.

The family that purchased the trunk was decidedly well pleased with it and felt it added nicely to their decor. But one day, as family members sat downstairs, they heard distinct scraping and thumping sounds in the room overhead, as if a heavy piece of furniture were being dragged from its place. They hurried up the stairs and found that the trunk had indeed been repositioned in the center of the room, and an extremely sweet smell, unfamiliar to all of them, filled the room. They lifted the heavy trunk lid, examined the inside, and looked around the...
decided to check out the contents of the old trunk in the attic. She lifted the heavy trunk lid and peered into the dark interior, but unfortunately a piece of her wedding dress caught the chain guard and brought the massive lid down on her head. Knocked unconscious, she collapsed into the trunk, where the lid slammed shut on her and locked tightly. The trunk became the young bride’s tomb; her family searched high and low for her and finally determined that she had decided not to go through with the wedding and had run away.

Years later, someone in the family (perhaps the mother, perhaps a housekeeper) was straightening up in the attic and, seeing the trunk, decided to peek inside. There she discovered the skeleton of the young woman, still dressed for her special day.

Although the family removed her body, it seems her spirit still works hard to escape its heavy tomb.

The spirit had been making itself known in the theatre as a series of men’s voices that could be heard loudly but which mysteriously faded away when people approached.
The time was late one autumn evening in 1992. Susan Sutton, president of Concordia’s Brown Grand Theatre, watched from one of the house seats as students from a community college theatrical group scurried about doing their various jobs for the evening’s play rehearsal. As Susan watched the stage, she became aware of the student across the aisle from her looking at the balcony with a perplexed expression. She followed his gaze and, much to her surprise, saw there, silhouetted in a window above them, a man in an old-fashioned coat, hands in his pockets, and top hat set sharply atop his head. The two in the audience watched him for a moment, then looked at each other in astonishment. When they gazed back up, the figure had disappeared. Normally in a theatre setting a costumed individual might not seem like such an unusual event, except that in the Brown Grand, the only access to the area where the man had been standing was through a latched door that could only be

dowel rod on the stage floor, never could be explained.

So who was this strange sprite? According to a conversation with a Ouija board in 1993, the ghost identified himself as Earl Van Dorn Brown, the only child of the theatre’s builder and first owner, Colonel Napoleon Bonaparte Brown, and his wife, Katherine. Brown, a wealthy banker with medical and later law degrees, arrived in Concordia in 1876 and immediately became a well-known figure to the townspeople. In 1905 he decided to help upgrade the downtown area by generously donating for an opera house. His son, the dashingly handsome Earl, a wild-spirited man who was loved throughout the town, served as the architect, design engineer, and foreman for the structure, which opened in September 1907.

For three proud years the Brown Grand offered Concordia some of the finest in fine arts, with everything from opera singers to educators, musicians to church lecturers. But then, on June 1, 1910, Colonel Brown passed away, followed sixteen months later by the death of Earl from complications related to gallstone.

Lawrence resident Sue Novak has haunted the halls of the Kansas State Historical Society since 1993. Her articles have mysteriously appeared in many past issues of Kansas Heritage.